

October 31, 2010

Scripture: Luke 19: 1-10

Sermon: "To Save the Lost"

This is a familiar story and I am sure that as soon as I said, Zacchaeus, most of us, began to sing that song, you know that song that we all learned in Vacation Bible School or Sunday School, growing up as children, you know that song tells us everything we need to know about Zacchaeus: He was short. He climbed a sycamore tree. And Jesus was going to his house today. But what is the message? Think about it. It is a fun, catchy song, but what does it teach us about God? That Jesus likes to eat with short people. If that's the case, I'm in luck!

Unfortunately, this familiar text has been done a disservice by one of our favorite songs, one of the songs that we love to teach our kids. We can name the highlights of this story: Zacchaeus was short. He climbed a tree. And Jesus eats with him. By what is so important about these facts?

Let's face it: we all have assumptions and preconceived notions about this text and because of these things, the preacher has the hard task of saying something new: something new about grace, something new about Jesus, something new about hospitality.

Our assumptions and preconceived notions about this text make us fall into a trap and we begin to force this text to do something it was never intended to do. We really don't listen or hear what this text is really saying to us as people of faith.

The simple truth is that this text is about our assumptions and our preconceived notions and how they prevent us from seeing each other as the person God created, claimed and named as God's very own.

The beauty of Luke's writing is that this text doesn't tell us anything new. We've heard it all before. And maybe that is the very reason we need to hear this text about grace, about perceptions, about hospitality, and seeing each other as a child of God over and over again because it tells us something that is the very basis of our faith and the hardest thing to embrace as a person of faith: that God's grace doesn't play by our rules, that God's grace doesn't ask our permission before it is given to all, that God's grace doesn't ask us who we think is worthy of the gift of God's grace. This text reminds us that God's grace is not given to those we think are deserving of this gift. This text reminds us that God's grace is given to all of God's children, no ifs, ands or buts.

This text, this familiar text, reminds us, and calls us to see this world through the eyes of faith, through the eyes of hospitality, to see this world through the eyes of WELCOME and see each other as a child of God, see each other as one of God's beloved, to see each other the way that God created us to be.

Our first clue that our assumptions and preconceived notions have misinterpreted this Scripture comes when we take a look at verse 8. In our traditional reading of this Scripture, we hear that Zacchaeus promises that he will do these things in the future like give away half of what he owns and will pay four times the damages that he cheated to earn.

Well, that is not exactly the reading of this particular line. In fact, the Greek of the original text is in the present tense. Everywhere else in the Gospel of Luke that this particular grammatical expression is used,

it is translated in the present tense except for in this story of Zacchaeus. And in that moment we realize that stereotypes and assumptions have affected the translation, the reading and the understanding of this text. We are trying to make this text fit our beliefs rather than have our assumptions and preconceived notions about it challenged.

in fact, if we read this text, the way it was supposed to be translated, in verse 8, Zacchaeus is really protesting that he already does these things, not the way we assume: that he has to do something to make this evil, awful tax collector worthy of God' grace.

And in that simple change of a phrase from future to present tense, our perceptions and assumptions are challenged. Things we thought we knew are proven false. Perceptions that we held based on a few facts are broken down. Labels that we trusted to help us figure out who was good and who was bad have been destroyed. Assumptions that we held for so long seem to fall away.

So in this new context, I invite us to hear this text again, this time for the Message version, hearing the present tense of this text:

Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way—he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by.

When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home." Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, "What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?"

Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, "Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages."

Jesus said, "Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost."

Like the crowd, when we hear the traditional reading of this text, we automatically assume that Zacchaeus is a bad guy. He is a tax collector, right? Which means that he robs people, which means he is part of the system that oppresses the poor, which means,...we can all fill in the stereotype. But in all honesty, we don't know Zacchaeus' real story, just the stuff we learned in our song, just stuff that we assume and presume, just the stuff that we thought we knew. Like the crowd, we assume that he is a crook and the amazing thing, that the good news is that Jesus would lower himself to go to Zacchaeus' house in the first place, that Jesus wants to go and eat at the house of a tax collector. We assume that the good news or the message that we should take from this story is that even God welcomes the sinner, so we should do the same.

And in these assumptions we fall short of the Good News that this story is really sharing with us and challenging us to live out in our lives as people of faith. When we think the good news is that God welcomes sinners, we are labeling God's grace. we are defining God's grace for good people, bad people, and worse yet: sinners. You know those people who are really really really bad.

Even then, our assumptions and preconceived notions about God's grace come through. We are using stereotypes and labels to separate the good from the bad, to separate the worthy from the unworthy, to separate us from those people.

God's grace is so much more than that.

Salvation comes to Zacchaeus that day not because he was worthy, not because he was unworthy and not because he asked for it because he was a sinner, not because he was one of "those" people who really need it. Salvation came to Zacchaeus that day because Jesus saw him for who God created him to be. Jesus saw him for who he really was. Jesus saw Zacchaeus as a child of God, beloved, forgiven and free. And in that moment, grace happens, no rules, no regulations, just a life-transforming, a life-affirming moment when one is accepted and welcomed simply because he is a child of God. In that moment, the invitation is to see beyond the perceptions and assumptions that separate and divide, and to allow them to be broken down, and for someone to be seen for who he or she really is: a child of God, beloved, claimed and named..

That's the good news that we need to hear over and over again: our perceptions and assumptions "prevent us from seeing others for who they really are, from hearing their stories, and most importantly, offering them grace." And through God's grace, we are accepted in spite of these things. And through God's grace, we are embraced regardless of what people assume about us. The good news is that God's grace breaks down our assumptions and preconceived notions and inspires us to really get to know that other person, to really hear their story, to know them more than just the facts.

The thing of it is: that day when Jesus extended the invitation to go to dinner, Jesus knew the good and the bad truth about Zacchaeus. Today, as we sit here in our church pews, God knows the good and the bad truth about us. And the good news is that God still welcomes us to God's table, not because of what we've done, not because we've earned it, but because we are a child of God, forgiven, loved and free.

The good news is that Zacchaeus is named and claimed because he is one of God's own. The good news is that Jesus came to save the lost, and today, just might be my day while tomorrow it may be your turn. The good news is that God's grace doesn't rely on our perceptions and assumptions to welcome those worthy in. The good news is that God's grace is messy, indefinable, uncontainable, and indescribable.

The good news: God doesn't ask us to get our lives together before God welcomes us and accepts us as one of God's own. Because God cares for the real us.

In our story, "Zacchaeus didn't have time to beautify his house, time to fix a special meal. Jesus was coming to dinner at that moment, meeting Zacchaeus where he was because that is how salvation works. We do not have to put things in order because salvation is not about being neat and orderly. It is not about making things look good, not about what we do, not about fitting into the world's stereotypes, it's not about the good or the bad labels by which we know ourselves and others. Salvation is about grace."

The good news is that Jesus sees us for who God created us to be. May we put aside our perceptions and assumptions and see this world through the eyes of WELCOME, through the eyes of God.

Amen.