

“Trying to See Who Jesus Is”
November 11, 2007

Isaiah 1:11-17
Luke 19:1-9

A little over two years ago, when I was still wondering if it was even remotely possible that God might be calling me to serve the First Congregational Church of Sonoma, I called the search committee chairwoman with a few questions about this congregation. I'd already had a telephone interview with the search committee and had been able to ask a few questions about the church, but, once I knew that Chey and I would be flying out here to spend a weekend with the committee, there were a few more things I wanted to know before we boarded that airplane.

So I called Mary Evelyn. I asked some questions about communion, about the choir, and about the Celebration Service. I asked, and she told me what she knew. Then I got around to asking the bigger question that was on my mind. I asked about Jesus. I asked about where Jesus fit in the life of this church. I was still on my best ministerial candidate behavior, so I didn't use these words, but what I was really wanting to know was whether Jesus had *any* significant place in the life of this church ... I wanted to know whether Jesus did anything more than make occasional guest appearances. I wanted to know, I *needed* to know, because the church profile hadn't made that clear to me.

As I remember it, after I asked my “Jesus question,” Mary Evelyn paused for a bit and then said she thought the focus here was more on God than on Jesus. I understood her to say that Jesus had a role here, but it was more of a supporting role, with God getting the star billing.

In the two years since that conversation, I've discovered that what I heard on the phone on that day, like almost everything else I heard from the search committee – by phone, on paper, or in person – was pretty much on right on target. And, of course, as you can see, what I heard on the phone that day didn't stop me from coming to believe that this is where I'm called to be.

Now, of course, two years later, my Jesus question isn't, “What do *you* do with Jesus?” It's, “What do *we* do with Jesus?” What role does Jesus have in your life, in my life, and, especially, in our life together? Do we look to and learn from him? Do we encounter God in and through him? Do we think it's worth the time, in the words of this sermon's title, to try to see who he was ... to see who he *is*?

As a body, as a congregation, we have answered those questions. The answers are, “Yes, we do look and learn. Yes, we do encounter God. Yes, we do think it's worth the time.” This is a Christian church, and we have covenanted with God and each other to proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed and to answer God's call to be the body of Christ in the world. So as a congregation, our answers are “Yes, we look and learn; yes, we encounter God, and yes we think it's worth the time.” But ... *and* we are a diverse body of people, with diverse theological allegiances, so I realize that, for some of you, the answer to those questions about Jesus may well be, “No, no, and no.”

But whether you answer, “Yes, yes, yes,” “No, no, no” or “Maybe, maybe, maybe,” this morning, I invite you to join me in exploring the story of Zacchaeus. I invite you to bring your curiosity to this story about a man who runs through crowds,

climbs a tree, and then happily hurries down, all because of Jesus. You don't have to believe what he may have believed; you don't have to believe what I believe; and you don't even have to be consistent and believe what you believed last year, last month, or last Monday. Just bring your curiosity and a willingness to listen to a story handed down through hundreds of generations.

As the Gospel of Luke tells the story of Jesus and his ministry, by the time Jesus reaches Jericho on his way to Jerusalem (which means he's on his way to his death), Jesus has been a busy man. After declaring in Nazareth that the Spirit of God has anointed him to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captive, and to let the oppressed go free, Jesus has been on the move throughout much of Galilee. He has freed many people from what Luke calls unclean spirits and has brought healing to many others. He has been teaching his disciples and the crowds to love their enemies, do good to those who hate them, bless those who curse them, and pray for those who abuse them.

In his travels, Jesus has told all who would listen that, to be able to follow him, they must sell their possessions, take up their own crosses, and seek the kingdom – the commonwealth – of God in everything they do. He has called on his followers to be merciful, to forgive, and to realize that, in God's commonwealth, those who are considered the least in human society are, in fact, the greatest. He has told his followers that they should rejoice not in their own power but in their being beloved of God.

In Luke's telling of the story, we don't know how much of all this Zacchaeus has heard before Jesus reaches Jericho, but, whatever he knows, Zacchaeus wants to see him. He wants to see Jesus so badly that he's willing to run through a crowd of people who almost certainly detest him, because he is a collaborator who has gotten rich by betraying his own people to the Roman occupiers. Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus so badly that he climbs a tree as if he's a little boy and not a chief tax collector.

Zacchaeus' efforts pay off; he gets to see Jesus. Jesus also sees him and asks him to hurry down the tree so that Jesus can stay at his house. Happily and hurriedly, Zacchaeus returns to his house, ignoring the insults and taunts of the crowd, and then he welcomes Jesus. He welcomes Jesus into his home *and into his life*. Encountering the Spirit of God in and through Jesus, Zacchaeus is at last freed from the unclean spirits of his own greed and lack of compassion. He is cured of his delusion that he can make himself worthwhile and secure through his possessions and his wealth. He is transformed into a man who gives to the poor and renounces the path of exploitation and coercion. Zacchaeus becomes someone who lets go of the power of empire – the power of economic and military might – and who embraces instead a life of love, sacrifice, and service.

This story of Zacchaeus is a short story ... a short story embedded in the larger story of the Gospel of Luke, all the Gospels, the rest of the New Testament, and the rest of the Christian tradition. We spend very little time with Zacchaeus, and we never encounter him again. But despite the brevity of Zacchaeus' story, someone or some community of Jesus' followers preserved it, telling it after Jesus' death, so that, a generation or two after his crucifixion, someone else could write it down, probably in Greek and probably on a papyrus.

The people who first told and retold this story and the people who then recorded and re-recorded in writing wanted to *share* it. They passed it along among the early, small groups of Jesus' followers, first Jews and then Gentiles. They continued to pass it

on, even when the Roman Empire outlawed Christianity and persecuted Christians. They risked their safety and their lives to preserve this story and the other stories about Jesus. They did all that, because they wanted to tell the world that during Jesus' life and after his death, they encountered the Spirit of God in and through him. They did all that because they wanted the world to know that this God they had encountered in Jesus cares for the poor, the wounded, the lost, and the rejected. They did all that because they wanted the world to know that, even when our hope for a world of true justice and peace seems small and weak, if we let it take root in our hearts, it will grow. It will grow and transform our lives, our families, our communities, and all of creation.

The story of Zacchaeus is a gift from the past. As a gift, it is yours to embrace and explore ... or to discard. The choice is yours.

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The gift I believe the Christian tradition brings to the world is to say that if you want a glimpse of what a man or a woman looks like when he opens himself fully to the Spirit of God or when she's willing to risk having God be at the center of who she is and what she does, look at Jesus. Look at Jesus and see someone who refuses to pick up the sword, someone who refuses to return violence with violence or hate with hate. Look at Jesus and see someone who joins the prophets of ancient Israel and cries out, "Seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." Look at Jesus and see someone who calls his disciples to love their enemies and to recognize as their neighbors anyone – *anyone* – who is in need of love, care, or mercy. Look at Jesus and see someone who trusts the power of God, *not* the power of wealth, of force, or of empire.

The gift of the Christian tradition is the invitation to look at Jesus and see someone who loves and welcomes the outcast and the despised – tax collectors, disreputable women and men, lepers, even lawyers. Look at Jesus and see someone who seeks the presence and guidance of God through prayer, day in and day out. Look at Jesus and see someone who risks loving and serving God in all that he does. Look at Jesus and see the one whom the disciples encounter *after* the crucifixion, the one who offers words of love and peace to the very people who denied and abandoned him.

My beloved brothers and sisters, this Jesus is someone worth trying to see ... he is someone worth coming to *know*. In his healing love, we encounter the healing love of God. In his care for the outsider, we encounter the God who calls us to erase the lines that *make* "insiders" and "outsiders." In his courage and strength, we encounter the courage and strength God has placed within each one of us, to speak the truth to power and to build a world in which no one starves to death, a world in which no one shoots a 17-year-old, a world in which no one is treated as anything less than a precious, beloved creation of God.

This Jesus is someone worth running through the crowds, climbing a tree, and hurrying back down that tree to be able to see ... and then to follow – today, tomorrow, and always. Amen.

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