

LUKE 19:1-10 WE CAN TURN TO OTHER THINGS NOV. 4, 01

INTRODUCTION

In my Sunday School in Harvey, Illinois, we used to be encouraged to memorize bible verses. When we were called upon in class, the kids who knew the fewest bible verses were the first to raise their hands in the hopes of being called on first. There was a strategy at work here. The first one of us called on used the shortest verse in the New Testament; “Jesus wept.” Thus we believed we were free for the rest of the session.

The story of Zacchaeus goes right along with “Jesus wept”. It is one of the stories from Sunday School that most kids remember. It has certain qualities that make it appeal to kids. It features a character who was small. For kids the information that Zacchaeus was small was an appealing bit of information. It was someone we could identify with. The other thing that makes the text appealing to kids is that Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see Jesus. This was especially appealing to boys. Climbing trees was challenging and scary. It was something we always wanted to do and it was always a great discovery when we could find a big tree that had the right configurations that made climbing way up into it possible for us. So most of us who attended Sunday School remember Zacchaeus for the reasons that were important to us as children. Those reasons may be as good as any other, but we will probably be talking about some other points as well this morning.

SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT THE TEXT.

1. First, a point about location. As we have noted before, most of these teachings of Jesus we have been thinking about were not placed in any specific geographical context. In some instances Luke thought the audience was the most important thing, so he would make a comment about that. There were references to Pharisees, the crowd, disciples. But not very often is geography important. A couple of Sundays ago there was a note about being on the border between Samaria and Galilee. This was noted because one of the figures in the episode was a Samaritan. This morning the location is noted. It is Jericho. We remember Jericho from the Old Testament. After the crossing of the Jordan at the end of the long trek across the desert, the people of God had to claim the land to which God had led them. So they did battle with Jericho occupied by Canaanites, and Joshua had his people to surround the walls of the city and blow the rams horns and the walls came tumbling down and the Cannanites were defeated.

New Jericho was apparently a wealthy and lovely city. Herod the Great built a city a short distance from the old city sited in the Old Testament and he made his winter residence and it was a grand city. It featured gardens. Gardens were a very important feature of the life of ancient Mesopotamia. This interest in Gardens continued into medieval Europe, and later. Gardens gave expression to an understanding of the proper relationship between human civilization and wilderness. A garden tried to touch both. These gardens, such as were in Jericho, the remains of which are still visible, sought to recapture the features of

Eden; representatives of the plants and animals which inhabited the earth with humans. The presence and movement of waters which flowed from Eden into the rest of the world. The order which allowed for the place of peace and harmony for human beings. Jericho was a rich place. It drew trade, thus the presence of the Tax Collector. And it also was a ripe place for the poor to seek alms. Driving around my part of Baltimore, there are certain sites where certain people set up their shop to seek donations from passing motorists. They may be injured veterans, homeless veterans, homeless mothers with their children. But the places chosen are places with heavy traffic. Northern Parkway and Old Harford Road. Roland Avenue and Northern Parkway. Roland Avenue and Cold Spring Lane. The same is true for Jericho.

2. This is of interest because in the other gospels Jesus passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem is noted for in Jericho Jesus deals with the poor and he heals people there. In Luke 18, Jesus heals a blind man in Jericho. In Matthew Jesus is confronted by two blind men who call upon him to have mercy and heal heals their blindness.
3. One of the most interesting features of this text and the placement of the two texts from last week and this week together is that the Zaccheus story seems to answer a question implied in the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the temple. The tax collector pleads for mercy for his broken life. Jesus says that man went down to his house justified. Did he know that? Did he resolve to change his life? Did he become a man of good deeds? We do not know the answer to these questions from the parable that Jesus tells. Of course, we have to remember that the parable is a parable. The tax collector is a part of the parable, not a real person. But did we not think when we heard the story, or the sermon, about what the tax collector did? In the conversation after the service, at least one of us asked, did the tax collector change his life.

It astonished me that none of the commentators I consulted for this morning took note of this question. We certainly must conclude that those who selected the lectionary readings for this season took note of the relationship between the tax collector in the parable and Zacchaeus. It certainly seems that the lectionary committee anticipated that we would ask what does a person like the tax collector do when it is disclosed that his repentance and plea for mercy are answered by a loving and merciful God. Or, if we are like the tax collector and hear the message, what ought we to do. In the Zacchaeus story we are shown how a tax collector who has experienced the love and mercy of God is to respond. He gives a fourth of all he owns to the poor, he gives alms, and he determines to repay all he has defrauded fourfold.

WE CAN TURN TO OTHER WAYS.

1. I think we are faced with a particularly relevant and poignant issue. In cases like the tax collector, we figure the issue is, how can people who are not like me and mine, mend their ways and become like me and mine. That is the way with most of us. But when the spirit of God moves in your life, when the curtain parts and we see the unfolding of the

healing and redeeming work of God in the midst of the world to which we are bound and in some cases, we have contributed to making, the issue is not how can those not like me mend their ways and become like me, it is what can I, a broken, flawed and sinful person, do in response to this movement of God in the midst of the world toward me.

Judaism was very interested in regulating the behavior of people. There are many reasons for this. One is that it was believed that God approved of certain behavior and not others. Behind this was the notion that there were objects, circumstances and behaviors in the world which reflected God and there were such things which did not reflect God. So it was the vocation of the Jew to engage in the behaviors and associate with the objects and circumstances which are nearer to God in order that God might be made manifest in the world. The same is true for Roman Catholic Christianity. There was and is a system of behaviors and value judgments which are associated with God and the world and the faithful are called upon to observe these things in order to make manifest God in the world to a world that does not know or does not acknowledge God in the world. Protestant Christianity has done much the same thing. My brother used to say that he was so ticked off at the church because he had his head filled with what was permitted and what was not permitted, and even now when he really didn't believe the ideas that informed what was permitted and what was not permitted, he still felt guilty if he did what was not permitted. Not only that, but he could look around him and see all kinds of people doing all kinds of things that were not permitted and they were suffering no pain from it.

2. I think I mentioned last Sunday that I am invited by an old friend of mine who teaches in the Towson English Department to do a presentation in his Cultural Studies class on Russell Banks novel The Sweet Hereafter. So I went to the university on Thursday to meet with the class. The novel, as I have mentioned before is about a school bus accident in which 14 of the small town's children are killed. The story is narrated by citizens of Sam Dent, the small New York town, who are affected by the accident. In each case their lives are altered and in at least one case, that of Nichle, a young high school student who is paralyzed from the waist down by the accident, she is empowered to make the moral decision at the center of the story, The action in the novel after the accident revolves around the attempt of many, but one in particular, lawyers who try to get the parents of children dead or injured in the accident to file law suits for compensation. For a couple of affected people, Billy Ansell who lost his twin children, and Dolores the driver of the bus, they want nothing to do with a lawsuit. They see that to engage in this law suit in the mistaken belief that they can have their grief and loss addressed is to engage in something which will tear at the fabric of the community. Nichole sees that this is the case. She, being a survivor and a victim, is a critical witness in making a case that the state, or the school board or the city of Sam Dent is responsible and financially must make restitution. But Nichole, when she testifies at a hearing, lies. She says that Dolores, the bus driver, was driving too fast and this caused the accident. Dolores is not wealthy and there is no point in suing her. The law suits are dropped.

A part of the power of the book is the description of Nichole, who is forced into the solitude of disability, is enabled in that damaged and solitary state, to make moral judgments and decisions that are based on a reading of the good of the community of which they are all a part. By means of the accident and her damaged life, she has been enabled to turn to other ways. And out of her decision and action, she frees the town from the danger it faced.

3. I could not help but think that we are in a time much like what is evoked as the aftermath of the accident as a result of the September 11 events. We know that life has changed. One of the things that has changed is the way in which the protection of our lives has become a matter of such priority. Some of us are buying cypro just in case. Some of us are staying out of the main flow of normal activity in America. Some of us are being careful about the mail, perhaps even fearful of touching it.

At the same time we are seeking to get back to normal and we are being encouraged to get back to normal. This last week the Post did a story on an outing by a couple of Congressmen and congressional staffers to a shopping center in Northern Virginia I think, where the Congressmen shopped and spent in a Target store and ate lunch at a McDonald's. As I have mentioned, we are encouraged to return to our normal life, to our normal spending so that the economy can begin to return to its normal business of generating wealth. We understand this, but we also realize that it is no longer enough.

CONCLUSION

We intuit that there is something else that is required of our lives as a result of that with which we have been confronted, as a result of that which we have seen move in and though the world and address our hearts. We know that something new and different is possible even required of us. We are like Zacchaeus. We have witnessed something and it is not possible to make a new kind of decision. We just don't know what it should be. There is no road map here. You can see us finding new ways to give money, but that is ambiguous because there are issues of how to manage all that money. There are some of us who want to go there; who want to see where it happened, to feel from that sacred place, the reality of what happened and think, perhaps, if we stand there we will see what we ought to do. There are those of us who are young who have made a new resolve about what it means to love and serve the country and they are seeking to serve in the armed forces. But in almost all cases, we are struggling with what other thing we can do.

To do this requires imagination. It requires imagination for us individually and as a congregation. Yesterday, working on the piece for the Newsletter that Cliff prepares for us, it occurred to me that in thinking about what we should do from this day forward as our life unfolds as a congregation together, has got to be determined in the context of what we have experienced as a country and as a culture.

Perhaps both individually and congregationally we need to be aware that what we are seeking for is not a grand and sweeping gesture. Perhaps, what we are seeking is

something smaller, but no less radical. Perhaps as individuals the other to which we can turn is small but symbolic and significant and it may be the same with us as a congregation. Amen