

IT DOESN'T TAKE MUCH

A sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Nadene Grieve-Deslippe on October 31, 2010
Crossroads United Church

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4
Luke 19:1-10

I had the opportunity to reconnect with a former minister of mine who had a great influence on me and the way that I exercise my ministry of word, sacrament and pastoral care. It was Thanksgiving weekend and we were helping my parents mark and celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary. Before we took leave of one another I shared with him just how influential he had been in my response to vocation, and I thanked him for the example that he had set. He responded quite humbly, thanking me for sharing, and then he went on to say, "I have heard that from several others and it is always nice to hear. My theology is very simple. I prefer that people have an experience of God and not just knowledge of God."

He had summed up in a single sentence what had separated him out from myriad others who had responded to a similar call. Others are more comfortable modeling a faith from the chin up; keeping the gospel at arms distance from the heart. While this certainly works for many, it falls short of reaching me. Don't get me wrong. If a service is too emotional then I can get as antsy as the next person, and on occasions where I know that emotion will run high-like on Good Friday for example- I try to be even more discerning. But my hope is the same as that of my mentor, though he could render it down to the succinctness of a single sentence. I, too, prefer that people have an experience of God and not just knowledge of God. And it strikes me that this likewise was the theology and modus operandi of Jesus.

I do concede that the gospel of Luke, as we have it, has been crafted and redacted and that it comes to us in a form that has continuity and particular focus. If we revisit the texts read on Sunday's over the past several weeks we

can glean that there is a thread of commonality woven throughout. Jesus is trying to reach the hearts of the religious elite by sharing parables that seem to draw a figurative line in the sand between those who have faith and act faithfully, on the one hand, and those who are more pious and ego driven on the other.

In the parable of the unjust judge and the widow, that of the Pharisee and the tax collector and in the story of Zacchaeus from this morning, Jesus is trying to get the pious to look into their hearts. Jesus is introducing them to God who is just, and generous compassionate and merciful. A creator who sees all persons as kindred: the Pharisee and the collector of taxes; the judge and the widow. And Jesus, through the pen of Luke, is demonstrating the need of the pious and the upright to have an experience of God and not just knowledge of God. But for the majority of the religious elite in the day of Jesus, this was an affront.

They preferred that the path to salvation be more about attention to detail as prescribed in the Law and less about grace. They were very comfortable with societal divisions that kept them apart from those that they judged as sinners. Even in the gospel for today Jesus is criticized and judged for the grace that he accedes to Zacchaeus. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Except for his propensity to embrace and welcome those that they would shun, Jesus could have been a valued contemporary of the Pharisees. He knew the Law as well as they and was a devout and observant Jew. It was his inclusivity that was the problem. And apparently in the gospel for today it was a problem for everyone in the throng that day.

There is something wonderfully engaging about the story of Zacchaeus. Peculiar to Luke, one might find it both comical and awesome at one and the same time. There is something funny about a grown man-short in stature-that climbs a tree so that he can see and hear. Or maybe he sought refuge from the dising crowd in the branches of a sycamore. Perhaps he reasoned that he might

be more likely to see and hear Jesus, without attracting the attention of those who despised him his wealth and his vocation, if he were enveloped in the branches of a spreading tree. But Jesus does not collude with secrecy. Nor is there any need to when all are seen as imperfect and loved in the eyes of God. But few of us are as good at being Christ like in our faith and attitudes as the one in whose footsteps we try to walk.

In an essay titled *Why Go to Church* in *Postcards from the Valley*, David Giuliano writes of attending church on a given Sunday out of rote habit. Slowly, and transformatively throughout the familiarity of liturgy, singing and praying, peace began to pervade his heretofore troubled and anxious soul. He pens, “We don’t go to church, as some in our culture imagine, because we think we are better or holier than thou. We don’t imagine that God loves us more. No frequent-flyer points are awarded for free trips to heaven in the afterlife. We go out of our need, our longing to be reconciled and reminded of our true identity as children of God-imperfect and loved.” (Giuliano-2008-23). It is this notion of being imperfect and yet loveable despite our shortcomings that some are not as mindful of.

Zacchaeus models for us the comical caricature of a sinner who was fully aware of his marginalization in the wider community. He may have ascended to a position of wealth through ill-gotten gains; despised and hated among the constituency and perhaps appreciated only by those who made their living in a similar way. And yet, there was a curiosity within him about the one who befriended tax collectors- a curiosity that compelled him to play the covert spy in a tree. And the one who had come to seek and save the lost does not pass by, but encourages the cowering one to come down so that they might really talk and get to know one another over a meal at Zacchaeus’ own home. Though we are not apprised of the conversation we are told the response of Zacchaeus to the conversation.

He will divest himself of half of his wealth and proffer it to the poor, and with the remaining half he will make restitution to any that he may have defrauded. So the salvation of Zacchaeus is not just a conversion story, but there will be myriad beneficiaries of his proffered assets. Salvation comes to an entire household and community through the discerning eye and welcoming spirit in the Christ, who likewise desires that persons have an experience of God and not just knowledge of God.

Zacchaeus is transformed from a curious spy, seeking refuge in a tree to a Son of Abraham following his experience. And the comic caricature in the tree proves to be a man of strength and integrity following his encounter with the Christ. Similarly, our strength of character and commitment is often spawned in vulnerability. Our understanding of God and the power of the mustard seed of faith are gestated oftentimes when we face challenges. The confrontation with his mortality just after becoming Moderator became an empowering journey for David Giuliano. He realized that vulnerability is a great teacher. He chose to lead out of his vulnerability as he battled a most formidable adversary, cancer. And the church has been made stronger for sharing in his vulnerability.

Following a chat that I gave this week to volunteers training for Hospice, a student approached me who seemed to struggle to find the words that she wanted to speak. It had been an emotional time together where the triumph and the tragedy of walking the walk with the dying were discussed. When finally she found the phrasing she was seeking she said, "Your vulnerability is empowering. Many people think that vulnerability is akin to weakness; but vulnerability can be empowering." I could only concur with her wisdom, and it was an affirmation again of the theology of my mentor and my prescription for living both personally and professionally. It was the experience of Holy mystery and not mere knowledge that made the connection between our souls. The God encounter that leads to wisdom through the experience.

The Christ saw a seeker hiding in the boughs of a sycamore tree and encouraged him to come out of hiding. Despised and hated the man found the strength to do just that. The Christ was judged unceremoniously again by onlookers for his inclusivity, but he did not allow their narrow attitudes to influence or constrain. He had come to seek and save the lost-all of who are valued and precious in the sight of God, and he continued to do just that even as the cross loomed large as a consequence. In the example of Jesus, recounted through the pen of Luke and on the lips of my pastor and yours: I prefer that people have an experience of God and not just knowledge of God. May God bless us in our seeking and finding. Amen.