

June 1, 2014 Luke 19:1-10, 2 Corinthians 5:17-20, Eph 2:14-16, 19

Seeking and Saving the Lost

Indeed it was a long hard road to Jerusalem for Jesus, and he just kept looking for signs of hope, that he was making a difference, that somehow his message was taking hold. And there it was when he was walking along through the crowd in Jericho, his eye catching a small man up a sycamore tree, looking down at him. Well, all be, he thought to himself, it's Zacchaeus the chief tax collector. Everybody knew him, personally. He was rich and these people were not. He could see their disdain in their squinty eyes – the eyes of judgment - for there would not have been a person he had not defrauded for the sake of raising taxes for both himself and the Romans. But then Jesus did not treat people from a “human point of view” but through God’s heart. He saw Zacchaeus the human person, the child of Abraham, not just the Director of Revenue Israel.

“Hey, Zacchaeus”, he waved. “Come on down out that tree and let’s get together at your house for some conversation!” There goes Jesus again with his meals with suspect people, even sinners, and everyone knew that Zacchaeus was a sinner,

and may have been personally hurt by him where it hurt – the pocket book. It reminds of all those jokes about death and taxes:

America is the land of opportunity. Everybody can become a taxpayer. Americans are now in a daze from intoxication.

There was a time when \$1000.00 was the down-payment on a car; now it's the sales tax.

If my business gets much worse, I won't have to lie on my next tax return.

But what a joy it was for Jesus to welcome a new friend to the journey of peace and friendship and to be welcomed to his home as well. There is nothing like sharing a meal together to solidify friendships. Despite what everybody else thought about Zacchaeus, Jesus learned he was trying to be a good person, for he more than tithed for the sake of the poor and was more than willing to pay someone back if they had been unjustly cheated.

Jesus was fulfilling the work that he was called to do – to restore people in their relationship with God, to rediscover, or to discover for the first time their own heart of compassion. His was the work of reconciliation, reaching out to people who had lost their way to God, whether they were poor or rich. Je-

Jesus was calling Zaccaheus to become a whole new creation, to radically change how he lived his life, how he even re-ordered his budget! For Jesus, it was not just about a 'soul' change, to find a spiritually good feeling, but a whole life change, one that would be ordered by God's priorities. Jesus was offering to this man the gift of reconciliation with God, the free gift of abundant life.

I remember the visit I had from a church elder from Bloor St United church in Toronto when I decided to join the church by re-affirmation of faith in my mid 20s and he asked me how I was going to re-order my life, how I was planning on organizing my budget, how I was planning on serving the church. He asked me what new activities I was going to get involved in the community. I was shocked by what seemed like a violation of my privacy, challenging my right to spend my hard earned money the way I wanted to for my own pleasures and survival!

That was my first real encounter (almost an intervention) with the expectation that being a Christian disciple meant that I was expected to bear fruit, to discover how I too was going to witness to God's unconditional love and grace with my

own life. At that time I never knew the path would lead to full time ministry!

It was time now for Jesus to head to Jerusalem for the final chapter of his own life's journey. He had done what he could to set the example for ushering in a new realm of peace and justice. Just like his own mother Mary had predicted, he had been reaching out to the people who lived on the margins of society – the lepers and other sick people, poor widows, suffering children, ostracized women, a blind beggar. He had lifted up the lowly many times.

He also called those who were rich, who were considered to be the enemies of the common people, who were now willing to give up their wealth, to come down from their high places and live generously towards God and others. Mary's song was being fulfilled: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly....He has helped his servant Israel according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." He truly had reconciled many people to God.

His walk for peace and justice in the world was nearly complete, but it seems there were more people that needed to be called by name to join in with that great work of restoring

people to God, of reconciling people to one another, empowering people to bear fruit in the way they lived their lives. Even after his death, the transformed Jesus continued to call people to join this great work. As the season of Easter draws to a close and we await the empowering gifts of the Holy Spirit given on Pentecost, we are called to reflect on this gift of reconciliation for our own lives, in our time.

So what are the challenges that you face in this important ministry of reconciliation? Are there political groups that you are involved in that need to be reconciled? (this might especially be the case as we approach another provincial election where there are so many promises of economic abundance, so much conflict and division). As the people of Syria continue to suffer terribly in the conflict in their country, we are being called, as are other countries to receive immigrants and refugees, to be more involved in the work of reconciliation and healing in that part of the world.

We have been learning this month about the work of our own church in healing and strengthening lives in Asia with our partner churches. And through learning just some of the wonderful music in our hymn books from Asia we can see how we too have been enriched by their vision and knowledge

of God. It stretches our spirits to hear the rhythms and sounds of other cultures praising God, otherwise we begin to think that our way is the only way to praise God.

We will hear later from Jonathan Lim how his ministry is reaching out to young adults now in Ottawa who have been raised in China with very secular values, yet who are still seeking after the meaning and purpose of their lives. We are now offering a new home on Friday evenings to their student and Young Adult ministry to this ministry of the Mandarin Alliance church as they teach the Word of God, Christian values and invite them to join on the Christian way of life. I hope that there will be ways that we can become true friends in Christ.

Of course our dear brothers and sisters at All Saints Anglican Church here in Sandy Hill have had to make the difficult decision to close their church building and to amalgamate with St Margaret's Anglican Church in Vanier which will be effective on July 1. They are two very different parishes, with people from very different walks of life and so they will need prayer and ongoing grace as they discover unity in Christ and in their love of God. In their difficult decision-making, they knew that we had offered them a place to

worship with their congregation in the future or even for a transition time while they discerned their path.

Many of you of course have personal issues in your families and your personal relationships in which you know that there needs to be reconciliation and you may wonder how you will find the courage to go about doing it.

Jesus made it look all so easy sometimes didn't he? – “Hey Zacchaeus, come down out of that tree and invite me over to your place for a meal and some conversation.” “Sure-come right over!” We know that not everyone is as eager as Zacchaeus was to meet Jesus, to really encounter the living God, to be open and honest about their struggles, to have their lives changed and challenged.

Sometimes we have to draw our courage and our strength from God and just do what has to be done, humbling ourselves to be the first person to reach out with love and compassion and to keep doing it until the other person's heart opens up so that God's grace can touch and heal their lives.

God's grace and love always finds a way. (tell story of Rabbi Steve Garten sitting with Will two days before he died while I could prepare for the Sunday service here – and how he took part in the funeral service the next week – this is

significant because their had been some very hard feelings on his part and the synagogues part because of the United Church's decision support Palestine's quest for justice while at the same time supporting Israel in their search for justice and peace for their nation.)

The decision is always yours as to whether you will participate in the building of God's kingdom, accepting the invitation to the ministry of reconciliation given to us by Christ, seeking the lost and healing ourselves and the world. It is sometimes a lot easier to hang back in the crowd with the rest of the grumblers, to point critical fingers at those who do get involved, to brood over past injustices, to cling to past pains or to be frightened by dwindling resources. The path to death and destruction is very wide. It is an easy road to walk down.

Or you can choose to follow Christ, allowing yourselves to be loved and shaped by God, to risk your life in faith, to let compassion lead you, to let God's dream be born in you, to be fed by the Spirit of love.

“ All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation: This is in Christ god ws reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation unto us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since

God is making his appeal through us”. 2 Cor 5:18, 19