

## “WHERE IS JESUS STAYING?”

Luke 19: 1-10

The story of little man Zacchaeus is one of those attractive cute stories that most Christians learn as children. I remember my Sunday School teachers showing us with felt board the pictures of the sycamore tree and the wee little man, Zacchaeus, who climbed it to see Jesus. When I visited Jericho a few years ago, the first thing our tour guide showed us there was the big sycamore tree in the center of town where people claim that it was the Zacchaeus tree. We tend to focus a lot on Zacchaeus' act of climbing a tree to see Jesus and how he was short. As I read this story, the part that struck me this time is what Jesus said, "I must stay at your house today." I am impressed that Jesus cared enough to seek out someone like Zacchaeus. At the same time, I am also puzzled about how Jesus invited himself to someone's house. This is highly unusual in any culture, especially in the Middle East. People there are supposed to invite you to their homes. No one who is respectable would invite themselves to your home. This incident of demanding hospitality reminded me of a story that is told about Juha and how he demanded hospitality. Juha is a fictional character in the Middle East who is used to tell stories of wisdom and tradition. Once upon a time, Juha went traveling on his donkey. Soon he came upon a camp of rich nomads, who offered him hospitality. But when the traditional three days had passed, he showed no signs of leaving. What to do? At the end of a week, the leader said to Juha, in a sad tone, "My poor Juha, your mother has died. You had better go home immediately." Juha began crying; he wept for a long time. Finally consoled, he said, "Now I'm an orphan; keep me." And he stayed there all his life.

So in the context of that culture, how could Jesus demand to stay at someone's house? Also, from calling Zacchaeus at the end of the story "Son of Abraham," we know that Zacchaeus was not even a Jew. So this was more reason not to go to his home. I am sure there would have been a lot of other homes for his stay and he didn't need to ask for one, especially from someone like Zacchaeus. This was a man who did not have a good reputation in his community. He was someone who exploited others for his own material benefit. Zacchaeus had a powerful position in a very important town: Jericho. I want to invite you to use your imagination here. This story happened near a customs' station on the road through Jericho. There were two major highways in Israel at that time and one of them went right through Jericho. Let's imagine that there was a large Jewish population in Lewiston, New York, and another large Jewish population in Buffalo. Jewish people from Lewiston wanted to travel to Buffalo but in between the two cities were Palestinians or Samaritans who were hostile enemies to the Jews. So the Jews just couldn't take the highway from Lewiston to Buffalo or they may have been mugged by their traditional enemies. So, the Jews from Lewiston went west into Canada, safely traveled south and came through a Canadian/American customs' station there. Jericho was the customs station; thousands of Jews came through there and they had to pay taxes on every cow, calf, and camel that came through customs. So, with his position as chief tax collector, Zacchaeus took advantage of the Jews and exploited their religious celebrations to collect money. He was not only an outsider to their faith, he was an exploiter.

The story took place around Passover time which meant that tens of thousands of Jewish pilgrims were coming down from Galilee, going around Samaria because it was unsafe, and coming through the toll booth at Jericho and paying their taxes. Researchers tell us that two or three million people showed up for the Passover. Jesus also was making this trip, from up north in Galilee, coming south through Jericho to Jerusalem. So, with all of this following and all the Jewish people he could have been staying with, Jesus invited himself to the home of Zacchaeus, an outsider to the faith and a despised tax collector who represented the oppression of the Roman Empire. So, why would Jesus do such a thing, defying all the norms of Middle Eastern hospitality and Jewish hatred of Gentiles? Because that is the kind of thing that God has done all along in our human history. It is the kind of thing that Jesus did over and over again in his ministry. He reached out to the most unlikely people, to the people who were rejected by society because he saw their desperate need for love and grace. He didn't wait until things were comfortable and acceptable. Jesus showed how God had little regard for our human limitations. Not only did Jesus go to Zacchaeus' home, he told him that he was going to stay with him. The word "meno" in the New Testament Greek always shows how God dwells among us to transform our lives and our world. Jesus' visit to the home of Zacchaeus was not going to be a casual

one. It was about the presence of God dwelling in Zacchaeus' home and heart. This dwelling presence radically changed Zacchaeus' life. He repented from his old ways of greed and gave away half of his possessions. Even though Zacchaeus was not Jewish, Jesus included him in to the family of faith and in the grace of God.

This is the example of our calling as the followers of Christ today. As the Church of Jesus Christ, we are compelled to follow Jesus into the world, into Zacchaeus' home wherever that might lead us. Think about those areas of need in our world and know that Christ is already there, dwelling to bring healing and transformation. We often think about God's presence being within the walls of a church building. Yet our challenge is to see that Christ is out there in the world visiting and dwelling with those who are rejected. Who might those be in Batavia and in our world? Are they migrant workers, city council members, powerful people, poor people, children?

As I begin my ministry here with you, I am excited to see where God is involved in our daily lives and where Christ is dwelling in our community and how we might be challenged as a church not to feel comfortable where we are, but to feel compelled to follow Jesus into the world where our human limitations and walls can be broken down. I am already very thankful for the things that God is leading you to do. Yesterday, the World-Wide Christmas Fair was a great example of following Christ into the world. This week, the presbytery's conference "Harvesting Justice" which will be hosted here in this church, is another great opportunity for us to learn about how Christ is leading us to reach out to migrant workers. In your bulletin there is a green insert with an invitation for all of us to follow Jesus into the world by "praying the news." I hope that we can practice that this week.

I want to tell you today about a group of people who touched my heart a few years ago through their work for transformation and healing. This group is called the Parents' Circle. I met them in a hotel in Old Jerusalem where they were giving a presentation about their work. These are Palestinian and Israeli parents who lost children or loved ones in the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. They are people who faced the depth of human cruelty, hatred and loss. Yet, instead of being trapped in their anger and pain, they have found the grace and courage to reach out to each other to work for justice and peace. I was moved by the story of an Israeli father who told us how his life was shattered when he had to hold his 16 year old daughter as she was breathing her last after a shopping mall bombing by Palestinians. His hopes and dreams for Marwa came to a harsh end when she died in his arms in downtown Jerusalem. After several months of hatred in his heart and a determination to avenge the death of his daughter, God opened a window to his heart to help him find compassion for the pain of the people on the other side. Today, this movement works on building bridges between the two people, especially with children through camps that help Palestinian and Israeli children learn to live together in peace. I believe that Christ was there dwelling in the hearts of these parents and helping them to be transformed.

So, our challenge today as the disciples of Christ is to follow Jesus out into all the places that resemble the house of Zacchaeus, to share the love and healing of Christ. The doors of this building don't just lead out to the streets of Batavia, they are the doors to God's world, to God's mission field where each one of us is called to cross boundaries and work for healing in our own lives and in our world. May we have the courage to cross with Jesus over all of human boundaries of hate to reach out in love and care. May we always be on the lookout to stay where Jesus is staying even if it leads us to the house of someone like Zacchaeus. Amen.