

Yr. C, Proper 26
October 30, 2022
Preached by Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1614 words

Lessons:
Psalm 32:1-8
Isaiah 1:10-18
2nd Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12
Luke 19:1-10

It's one thing to tell a story that *praises* a tax collector—as Jesus did in last Sunday's Gospel lesson. It is quite another thing to actually go and stay at the home of the *chief* tax collector. It took a lot of nerve on Jesus' part to invite himself into the home of Zacchaeus, and to flaunt it in front of all the respectable people of Jericho!

Tax collectors were not like IRS agents. They weren't government bureaucrats working for modest salaries and 'just doing their job.' They were profiteers, milking the system (and the people) for all they were worth. And if it was not bad enough that tax collectors cheated their way into prosperity with dishonest commissions; they were also sellouts—traitors—who fleeced their own people in order to further expand the rich treasury of the Romans. One ancient poet described them as 'birds of prey.'¹

I had an experience in December of 1988 while traveling in Ghana, West Africa that reminds me of the kind of tax collectors we're talking about. My Ghanaian friends took me out on my 1st night in the country. As we approached a traffic circle, a soldier with an M-16 slung over his shoulder leaned into the driver's window with a smile and said, "Do me some Christmas!"

Now if you want to pass on through the traffic circle without a vehicle search, you just pay the man. Back in 1988, Christmas was celebrated at *every* traffic circle in the city of Accra!

So, the difference between those Ghanaian soldiers and the ancient Jewish tax collectors was that the Ghanaians were actually honest about *their* extortion—They did *not* say, "Do the government some Christmas." They said, "Do *me* some Christmas."

We really don't have a category in our modern American experience to describe just how low tax collectors were willing to go for a denarius. And we really don't have a word in our vocabulary for just how low tax collectors were esteemed by their neighbors. All this is to say that *everybody* in Jericho looked down on Zacchaeus, and not *just* because he was short.

The word on the street was that Jesus was passing through Jericho. Jesus shared a name with someone else who had 'passed through' Jericho more than a thousand years before—remember that it was Joshua—*Jeshua*—who 'fit' the Battle of Jericho, and the walls came tumbling down! For *this reason*, if not for his own reputation as a healer and prophet, people would have come out in the streets to meet "*Jeshua* of Nazareth."

Chief among the curious people of Jericho was Zacchaeus. I believe St. Luke expects us to snicker at the image of the rich and powerful man-about-town with a scummy reputation, perched up in a sycamore tree. Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it?

¹ E. Badian, "Publicans," in *The Oxford Companion to the Bible*, eds. Bruce Metzger and Michael Coogan, (NY:Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 631.

And then Jesus enters the scene, and *unlike everyone else in Jericho*, he looks up to Zacchaeus. Jesus calls him down—perhaps in more ways than one, and we know that little Zacchaeus *did* come down and meet Jesus.

What if we took this story seriously? What if *we* were surprised and delighted to meet Jesus, and he was *looking up to us* instead of looking *down* on us? Jesus said, “Just as you have done acts of mercy to the least of these, you have done them to me.” So if we take Jesus at his word, we *will meet him* in our acts of mercy—in the eyes of the ‘least of these’ who are looking up to us.

Like Zacchaeus, we will have to come *down* from our ‘high places’ in order to meet Jesus face to face. Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus in just the right place if he only wanted a *distant look*. But he had to come *down* to have an intimate, face-to-face encounter.

So, where are *your* high places? Where do you feel safely perched for a good, *distant* view of the famous Jesus of Nazareth? Where are your *low places*? Where do you come down, even kneeling down, to meet him face-to-face?

Some years ago I was riding in a shiny, black limousine through our state capitol. Oh, not for fun. I had just finished a burial at Elmwood Cemetery, and the funeral director was driving me and my crucifer back to our church.

I was looking *up* at the magnificent dome of the Greek Orthodox Church, admiring the beauty of the architecture, when the funeral director whipped the steering wheel on that Cadillac hard to the left, and did a ‘180’ on Main Street. He apologized, “Folks, I need to turn around. Someone just collapsed on the sidewalk beside us.”

I had not seen the person. I was looking up at a *distant view*.

The funeral director called 911. When he stopped at the curb, my crucifer and I jumped out of the back seat in our white robes and ran to the person who had collapsed. It was raining on us as we leaned down to check on her. She was bleeding from a cut on her head.

“Are you okay?” I asked. *What a stupid question!* There was no answer.

“*Hello!*” I shouted as I nervously grabbed her wrist to search for a pulse. Still no response.

I squeezed my thumb against her wrist, but I could not feel a pulse. Any medically trained person can tell you that if you squeeze as hard as I did in my anxiety, you *won’t feel* a pulse!

We found her name...on a hospital bracelet attached to her other wrist. “Mary, Wake up!” I demanded, in a nervous, yet bold voice. No response—just the persistent raindrops from above.

Now, I don’t know much about the power of paramedic procedures, but I know the power of words, especially the power of one’s name, and so I kept using the *only power* I had. “Mary!” I commanded. “We are with you. You are not alone.”

She opened her eyes, and *looked up at me*. It must feel strange, waking up after collapsing on a sidewalk to discover two figures dressed in white, floating over you...with a funeral home limousine parked nearby.

“Are you a priest?” she asked. “I need a priest.” It dawned on me—though not quite immediately—that I *was* a priest. “Yes—yes, Mary, I am. What do you need?”

“I need you to pray for me.”

“Come on,” I said, “Let’s get out of the rain.” My crucifer and I helped her up. We knelt under a nearby awning, and we prayed.

My eyes had been fixed on things above—at a *distance*. Like Zacchaeus, I was called down to the street to meet Christ...in the face of someone seeking the healing prayers of a priest.

Next Sunday, we will renew our baptismal covenant. I’m going to ask you this question (among others): “Will *you* seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?”

Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus, and he had to *come down* to meet him. This was the first step on the journey for him. It is also the first step on the journey for us.

“O for a closer walk with God, a calm and heavenly frame, a light to shine upon the road that *leads me* to the lamb!”²

By coming down and meeting Jesus face to face, and *not just* from a distant view; his light shines on us. He illuminates who we truly are—underneath our masks, beneath our greed and dishonesty, underneath our pettiness. We discover that even scummy tax collectors are children of God.

When *we* come down to meet Jesus...it eventually dawns on us, even if not immediately, that *we* are children of God.

This. This is the place where we discover the joy that Zacchaeus found when he met Jesus. This is the place where we can be transformed and delighted to have Jesus as our special guest. This is where we loosen *our* grip on our possessions and become more generous in our *thanks*-giving. This is the place where we seek forgiveness from our trespasses, and reconciliation with our neighbors.

Even though it’s stewardship season, I’ve deliberately postponed any financial messages until we’ve had a chance to get to know each other. You *know* that tackiness is considered one of the seven deadly sins for Episcopal clergy! Well, during the next several weeks I’ll invite those of you who are ready to consider making a promise—a pledge—for 2023.

Now, Zacchaeus gave away *half* of his money, But I am *not* going to ask you to do this. By comparison, our ‘ask’ is going to seem like a bargain!

² William Cowper, “O for a closer walk with God,” *The Hymnal 1982*, #684, verse 1.

You'll be asked to do just one thing—to prayerfully consider what God is calling you to give, to do, and to become in this new beginning. Just dream a little about how you might show *your* thanks-giving to God.

The theme of our stewardship focus is “New Beginnings,” and this is absolutely *not* about me beginning as your new priest. ‘New beginnings’ refers to this moment in time, in *this* parish’s life, when *all of us*—like Zacchaeus—are called *down* from our comfortable perches to meet Jesus face to face, to be reminded of who we truly are, and to respond generously *with gratitude* as children of God often do.

This is a new beginning when all of us—like Zacchaeus—are called *down* to meet Jesus face to face, and walk with him into the next chapter of Christ Church’s mission and ministry.

“O for a closer walk with God, a calm and heavenly frame, a light to shine upon the road that leads (us) to the lamb!”³

Amen.

³ William Cowper, “O for a closer walk with God,” *The Hymnal 1982*, #684, verse 1.