

“God Stays with Sinners”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, October 30, 2016
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
Celebration of the Lord's Supper

Readings from Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4,11-12 and Luke 19:1-10

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

We must always give thanks to God for you, brothers and sisters, as is right, because your faith is growing abundantly, and the love of everyone of you for one another is increasing. Therefore we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.

To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith, so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome Jesus. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

Luke 19:1-10

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations and all of who we are to you and to the power of your Spirit. I pray that you would take the words that we have heard offered in song and in prayer, the words that we have heard read from sacred scripture, the words that each of us carry within and the words that you have laid upon my heart this morning

to share. Touch, bless and transform all of them into the living word, the word of Jesus Christ. And let that word, by the power of the Spirit, do within us what you need to have done, each of us hearing the word that is for us and for our heart and our soul. Let that word feed us as much as this table will feed us this day. We ask all of this in the faithful name of Christ who is our Lord. Amen.

Nine. More. Days. Nine. Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Election Day. Nine. Now the drama is, will it be over then? I don't know. But nine more days. Thanks be to God. As I mentioned earlier in the announcements, I have the great pleasure of being married to a counselor, a psychologist by training. And as such, every now and then I learn these little tidbits about how people manage stress and anxiety. Sometimes they are not little tidbits, they are big concepts and my wife does her best to help me understand what they mean and how they work. One of those concepts is called "totalizing". Totalizing is what we do when we meet someone and have an encounter with them, or we see them on television or we just read a story about them and we say to ourselves, "Aha! I got it. I know who that person is." Based on that one experience, we create a picture and we think we know everything about this person. We know it all. There is no more to think about. There is no more to worry about. This is it.

Anybody heard the story of Zacchaeus before? Yeah, okay, there's two of you, at least. That's good. They had the courage to raise their hands. God bless you. Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector. He's like the scoundrel of the scoundrels. It also mentions he is rich and it mentions he's short. He wants to see the teacher, so he runs ahead. He climbs up a tree, so he is also pretty ingenious, figures out how he can do it. He runs ahead of the teacher. The teacher looks up and says, "Zacchaeus, get down here. I'm having dinner at your house right now." And Zacchaeus is like "Who-Hoo!" And he runs down and is excited. He meets Jesus. The crowd begins to grumble because Jesus is encountering Zacchaeus. They know who Zacchaeus is, right? They have already labeled him. They have totalized him. He is gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner? So the crowd knew that Zacchaeus was a sinner. We knew because he was a chief tax collector and he was rich and people in the Bible that are either rich or tax collectors—they are not so great. But the crowd definitely knew. This guy's a sinner. Before Jesus will go in and have dinner with this sinner, this sinner needs to repent from his sin. So Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, half of my stuff I will give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay them back four times as much. Meeting you is such a great gift that I will change my life on the spot if you'll only tell me it's okay." And then Jesus said these amazing words, "Today salvation has come to this house because Zacchaeus, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Zacchaeus, the scoundrel, meets the teacher, is excited. As he stands there he confesses his sin and repents. Jesus forgives him and says, "Salvation is yours." And then my guess is they go in and they eat. And the crowd, like us, are convinced that Zacchaeus is a scoundrel. And that the only way for a scoundrel to be at peace with God is you better change your life before you have that meal. The crowd totalized Zacchaeus just as many of us have totalized Zacchaeus. As we have heard this story time and again, we have convinced ourselves that Zacchaeus is a bad person whose only redemption is when he meets Jesus Christ and he confesses and changes and then has a sacred meal with the Lord.

Are there any other people that we tend to totalize in our lives right now that you can think of? Let's just play a game for a minute. Just let's see. Crooked – (crowd answered "Hillary"). He said "Hillary" in case you weren't listening. That's right, Crooked Hillary, who – and what should we do to her? Three words: lock her up. We hear it all the time, right? Because of an email server

that now the FBI is looking into again, because of this one slice of a person's life, certain people have taken that slice and they've brought it out, they've blown it up and they said, "Aha, I've got it. This is who she is. She's Crooked Hillary and she should be in jail." In fact, I read this week that one of her opponent's supporters said that, and this is a quote, "Everything she does is illegal and she should be locked away." Again I lift this up because this is an act of totalizing someone based on a sliver of awareness. Anybody know who her opponent is?

The adjectives that are used to describe him, I will not repeat in church based on what has been recorded and talked about. "Oh, he's a _____ kind of a person. Donald Trump has no respect for women because he does this all the time." Again they take a sliver of experience, they blow it up and make it the only way to think about a person, and then they plaster that over him and say, "This is the only way he can be. He can only be, in the safest of terms, a scallywag, or something." And when we do that, we minimize the reality of who we are looking at, whether it's Donald Trump or Hillary Clinton or Zacchaeus, the tax collector who was rich. Maybe some of you have been totalized in your life. Someone has based an awareness of who you are on the smallest of encounters, and maybe, like the crowd in this story, they got it wrong. They didn't understand who you were or what you were about. They didn't understand your motivations. They didn't understand your behaviors. They didn't even understand the words that you chose to use, because of their preconception of who you are as a person.

I'd like to read this story again, but I'm going to translate it myself. *Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it and there was a man there named Innocent One. Most people knew him by his Greek name, Zacchaeus, which means Innocent One. He was a chief tax collector and he was rich. He wanted to see the teacher but on account of the crowd shunning him and shutting him out, because he was too short and he was too rich, and he was the chief tax collector, he ran ahead of them and he climbed up in a tree to see the teacher, because the teacher was going to go that way. And the teacher showed up in that place and he looked up in the tree and he said, "Innocent One, hurry down and come here, I am going to eat in your house today." And so he hurried down and he was happy to welcome the teacher. The crowd began to grumble and say, "What??? The teacher is going in to eat with a sinner?" And Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, and loud enough for the crowd to hear, "Look, half of my possessions I give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay back four times as much." Jesus said to him, "Today wholeness and restoration have come to your house, because you, too, are a son of Abraham. I have come to seek out people like you and bring them back into the fold."*

Our story about Zacchaeus is a poor translation in our Bibles. The verbs that say "I will give to the poor" and "I will pay back four times" do not exist in the Greek. Zacchaeus is saying to Jesus that he is already a good person and he gives half of what he has to the poor people; that if he finds he has defrauded anyone, he pays them back four times as much as is commanded in Leviticus in the Old Testament. And basically, Jesus says loud enough for everyone to hear, "This is how we are supposed to do it." And he brings in this tax collector, a rich guy who is short, as an example for everyone in the house of Israel to understand what it means to be good and to do the right thing, regardless of your birth or your occupation. Most likely Zacchaeus was born into a family of tax collectors, he inherited wealth and made a lot for himself. He did work for the Roman occupiers and the Jews were not very happy about that. They labeled him a sinner. But it is important for us to remember that the Bible, in naming him in his story, labels him the "Innocent One" who was unjustly persecuted by the crowd and who was restored by Jesus Christ to true fellowship and then they shared a meal.

To me the good news of the story of Zacchaeus is that we do not need to get ourselves right with God before we come here to this table. We need to simply come to receive the gift that is given

which is welcome and eternal life, and then quietly in our hearts, we say “thank you”, for once we were lost and now we are found. Amen.