

Luke 19:1-10

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 him. 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."

This past week we had a very good discussion during what, I guess, would be called the sermon time at our Wednesday service. We don't really have a sermon during that service. What we have is more of an open discussion on the passages. More of you should come a see. I think that you will find it to be a great addition to your week.

We use the same passages for Wednesday as we do for the coming Sunday, and right at the beginning of our discussion a question was posed. It was wondered what the difference was between the Tax Collector in our Gospel for this week and the Tax Collector in the Temple courtyard that we heard about last Sunday. They were both tax collectors. They both repented. They both found salvation. That is a lot of the same. Maybe this is a difference. One was a parable and the other was historical.

So, I suppose, that difference deserves a deeper dive, a closer look. The obvious question, then, that begs answering is what's the difference. What is the difference between a parable and a historical event? Well, most people, I think, would define historical as being accurate, and factual, and true. I mean, that would be correct for authentic history accurately reported.

I think people struggle a bit more with the definition of a parable. Most would understand that a parable is a story that did not actually take place. It is a story, told with the purpose of sharing a deeper truth. On one level the story is not true, in that it didn't actually happen. On the other hand it is true, in that it carries a profound truth for life. So, a parable is a created story that is absolutely true. The struggle comes in that so many get stuck on the made-up part of it and are then not able to get to the truth, the deeper truth, in it.

What then about a historical event? Well, assuming that a historical event is told honestly, a historical event is true on its surface. For example, in 1941 Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese which brought the United States into the Second World War. That is a historical event. We get that fact in the history books. We know that it happened. We can visit the memorials and see the damage. But often there is a deeper truth even in historical events that are important to understand. Such as...The road to the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, probably started in 1931. You see, at that time, resource poor Japan invaded Manchuria in order to improve their economic prospects. In 1933 they withdrew from the League of Nations, because the League of Nations condemned their expansion, which eventually led up to all-out war with China in 1937. In 1940 Japan signed a pact with Germany and Italy that aligned them against the countries that were standing in their way of further conquests in Asia and in July of 1941 Japan occupied French Indonesia. It was a decade of events that finally led Japan to take out the US Naval Fleet so that they would have time to solidify their expansion unmolested. That is just some of the deeper truth behind the historical event that Japanese planes dropped bombs on Pearl Harbor.

And sometimes the deeper truth behind a historical event is parable-like. It is a historical event, maybe a simple event that was not necessarily memorable in itself, that has been set in place, into history, in order to show us a deeper truth for our lives. I think what happened with Zacchaeus fits that. On the surface it is simply a single day in Jesus' three year ministry where another person got it. And, even though that alone is a wonderful thing, I wonder why, given its commonness, it made the cut. Why did Luke include it? Or even more than that. Why did Peter, who was probably there when Zacchaeus climbed the tree, why did Peter feel that it was important enough to tell Paul who in turn was moved by the story enough to relay it on to Luke years later who then thought that there was something more than just the simple event which warranted it being included in his Gospel? And given all that, what are we learn from

Zacchaeus, both symbolically and actually, that enables us to connect further to the profound message, the deep truth, that God wants us to hear?

How about this? Once there was a son of Abraham who had become lost. He turned his back on his people and on God, and worked for, and with, their enemy collecting taxes and cheating people. One day a Rabbi came along. He was teaching throughout the country and gaining many followers. He told people about how they had become lost and that they needed to turn away from their wrong-headed actions and to turn back to God. One day the Son of Abraham turned Tax Collector heard that this Rabbi, this special teacher, was coming to town and he was moved to go and see him. And he did. But when he arrived he found that his limited height made it impossible to connect. So, he decided to climb a tree in order to see this special person. And in that tree a connection was made. Jesus reached out to Zacchaeus and made a connection and that changed Zacchaeus's life forever. And Zacchaeus became a new person with a new focus and a new joy that was not centered on those false things he used to think were so important.

So, did you hear the deep truth of the historical event?

Truth #1: There was a man named Zacchaeus who had become lost in his pursuit of worldly things. Zacchaeus is all of us, who, at one time or another, lost our way and became something other than what God created us for.

As far as we know, Zacchaeus was perfectly happy making the big bucks and wielding the power that came with his position. But something had to be missing or he would never have been drawn to Jesus on that road. Truth 2 is that God draws us. He draws us to himself, even when we don't recognize it is he who draws us.

Truth #3: The teachings of some man who people were calling a Rabbi out in the countryside reached Zacchaeus and something or someone became the catalyst for him to go and see. I don't know what it was. It might have been God. It might have been an invitation from a friend or a family member that God used. I don't know, but something was the final catalyst that got him there that day.

While there, his shortcomings, both actual and metaphorical, both physically and spiritually, required him to take special actions to overcome them. Truth 4 is that he acted. He didn't have to. He could have walked away. He could have let Jesus move on by. Instead, he pushed past himself and took action to connect.

Truth #5: And this is the critical truth of the story of Zacchaeus...He connected to Jesus. This is the part that the whole story hinges on. He overcame his shortcomings. He pushed passed any hesitancy. On a spiritual level, he stepped away from the sin that separated him from God. He turned to Jesus. And in that moment, his life was transformed. He was healed. He was made whole. And Jesus proclaimed that Zacchaeus and his house had found salvation.

You know this could have been just a simple history event shared to fill a few lines on a page, barely worth remembering. Or it can be embraced as a deeper truth that when summed up tells us that no one is beyond the reach of Christ. It tells us that Christ will respond to our efforts, no matter how small, and come into our lives, and set all things right again. It teaches us that everyone, even the lost tax collector, deserves to be invited to see and know Jesus.

The deeper truth in the story of Zacchaeus is that there are people who have an emptiness inside them that they don't understand. They think that they have dealt with it and filled it with other things, but they are lost. They are being drawn by God out of that existence and just need the final piece of the puzzle, an invitation for a loving friend, to come and check it all out at a place where they can see Jesus. Maybe they might need a boost into the tree by that loving friend, but I have no doubt that when they see Christ their lives will be changed forever.

Do you know someone like that? Do you know someone willing to be that loving friend? If you do, I hear that Jesus makes regular appearances at a place called Redeemer. Let's make the invitation.

Amen