

“Trick or Treat”

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Psalm 119:137-147

Luke 19:1-10

“Then Jesus said...

‘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 19:9-10

Let us pray... O God,

May we be ready to receive the gift of your blessing

even when it comes to us in an unlikely package.

Amen

Our Gospel lesson today finds Jesus on the homestretch of
his journey to Jerusalem – his date with destiny.

Jericho was historically the route of invading armies
headed for Jerusalem.

And like a warrior of old,

Jesus was determined, utterly focused on his mission
to confront the powers of institutional evil, head-on...

I love adventure stories – especially with epic journeys of heroes
coming out of the wilderness to bring sanity back to civilization –

like a recent movie called “The Book of Eli” in which

Denzel Washington’s character must bring

the last copy of the Bible across a post-nuclear wasteland.

Sometimes the hero is an unlikely one – who’s not big and strong,

but meek and clever like David against Goliath,

Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz”,

Frodo the Hobbit in “The Lord of the Rings”;

Or how about the Tortoise in that classic fable

of a turtle’s race with a rabbit –

‘I may be s-low, but I’m sure.’

Sometimes, the hero needs help from an unlikely ‘little guy’

who shows up along the way,

like Yoda in “Star Wars” who is small, but mighty

as he teaches Luke Skywalker how to become a Jedi Knight.

And even Jesus needs a little help –

and gets it from an unlikely ‘little guy’.

Willard, p.2

Zacchaeus is described as being a small person –
in more ways than one.

He is physically short and has almost no stature at all –
that is, no respect at all in the Jericho community
even though he is a very rich person.

Instead, he is despised because he was the chief tax collector
of that region and tax collectors as a group
were seen as collaborators with the Romans
who oppressed people with crushing debts,
seizing their farms and destroying their social unity.

And Zacchaeus is the chief of those tax collectors.

It's big news that Jesus of Nazareth has come to town –
who by this time, is called 'the Lord'
and as a celebrity, he draws a crowd wherever he goes.

And they know something is up
as he is on his way to Jerusalem for the Passover.

And crowds line the streets, just to get a glimpse and call out to him,
but Zacchaeus can't push his way through because he is short
and no one will give him a break.

So, he runs ahead to climb up into a shade tree to see what's going on.

As a rich person he probably wore fine clothes –
the equivalent of an Armani suit and Gucci sandals
which he risked tearing and scuffing as he scrambled
up that sycamore tree.

And what a comical sight that must've been! Even pathetic...

But when Jesus comes to this juncture in the road –
this point of no return,
he is treated to the sight of a person who would risk
his self-respect to look silly in the effort just to see Jesus.

And Jesus stops from his dread momentum towards Jerusalem
to look up and – not only have compassion for this fellow,
but for himself, too.

Biblical storyteller, Tom Boomershine describes this event
as Jesus' 'last chance to play' before the Crucifixion.

And it is as if Jesus says,

'Zacchaeus, come on down from there,
because I must party with you today.'

Willard, p.3

There's something we are not seeing here about Zacchaeus –
this wealthy person who is so desperate to see Jesus.
We only get a hint of what had been going on inside this man's heart.

In the Gospel of John, Phillip and Nathaniel were young people
who were students of scripture and current events –
they were looking for God and they were ready
when Jesus called them to be disciples.

The thief on the cross who would cry out to Jesus
just to remember him in heaven,
demonstrated an openness that suggests
he had a heart that had already been struggling for insight.
And so it seems that Zacchaeus was not content with
what he had to do for a living, though he had everything.
Still, he yearned for righteousness like the psalmist who said
in Psalm 119:141...
'I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts.'

At Bible study last week, I mentioned a poem called "Richard Cory"
by Edwin Arlington Robinson that Simon & Garfunkel
used as lyrics for a song...

They say that Richard Cory owns one half of this whole town,
With political connections to spread his wealth around.
Born into society, a banker's only child,
He had everything a man could want:
power, grace, and style.

But I work in his factory; And I curse the life I'm living
And I curse my poverty; And I wish that I could be,
Oh, I wish that I could be... Richard Cory.

He freely gave to charity, he had the common touch,
And they were grateful for his patronage
and thanked him very much,
So my mind was filled with wonder
when the evening headlines read:
"Richard Cory went home last night
and put a bullet through his head..."

<http://www.lyricsfreak.com/s/simon+and+garfunkel/#share>

Willard, p.4

We don't know what someone is going through –
unless they tell us or we make a point to ask.

At some point everybody is going through a hard fight –
even Jesus.

The hardest journey any of us can make is from the head to the heart,
but the journey doesn't stop there.

Like Zacchaeus, we have to respond gratefully as God guides us
into living more authentic, 'self-actualized', 'born-again' lives
that are connected with others.

With Zacchaeus, we discover a person who just needed
an invitation to climb down out of the tree
in which he was stuck to get back into community.

He proved to be a devout person – like the psalmist
but he was trapped by the politics and powerplays of his life.

And without being told,
he knew what he needed to do from then on.

Jay O'Callahan is one of our country's greatest living storytellers
and I love the personal stories he tells about growing up
in suburban Boston in the 1940s and '50s.

One of his best is a story about a friend called Todd
a descendant of John Quincy Adams and a very affluent family.

Jay was middle class with both parents
working as teachers.

Todd's father was very strict and often punished him
by grounding him after school for a month at a time.

But even so Jay and Todd were great friends.

One day, Jay had come to visit and was waiting in the hall while Todd
went upstairs to his room to get something.

Jay happened to be looking into the parlor,
when he saw an older woman sitting there, watching him.

It was Todd's grandmother.

He said,

'Oh, Mrs. Quincy! I'm sorry!'

She said,

'Please come in and sit down. You're the tree-climber aren't you?'

'Yeah, I suppose I'm too old to be climbing trees.'

Willard, p.5

'I didn't say 'apologize'. I said 'sit down', I want to talk...
I climbed my last tree when I was 75.'

'You did?'

'When I turned 40, I decided to start telling the truth.

I did. Sit down.

You and Todd have a great friendship.

Ha-ha-ha! I love to see him happy!'

You know that Todd's father doesn't like you. Do you know why?'

Jay squirmed at this and looked down at his sneakers and said,

'Because... I'm Catholic.'

'Irish Catholic!

If you were English Catholic, he would think you were eccentric.

Now we have just fought the most vicious war

in the history of the world over what is happening
right here, right now.

Don't let Todd's father break the friendship up!

He was hurt in the Great War, you know.

He doesn't teach any more. He is certainly angry.

Sometimes when people grow up, they see

with a clarity that obscures everything important,
like friendship.

Friendship is like tree-climbing,

you have to make the effort to get up there
to see the buds grow!

Don't let Todd's father break the friendship up!

We tree-climbers must stick together!'

'Yes! Yes, Mrs Quincy!

We tree-climbers must stick together!'

Amen

*Our Jewish Testament lesson today
is from Psalm 119 which is the longest psalm with 176 verses.
God is addressed directly – or referred to,
in every verse.
In verses 137-144, the psalmist celebrates the righteousness of God
even in the midst of an unrighteous world.*

- 137 You are righteous, O Lord,
and your judgements are right.
- 138 You have appointed your decrees in righteousness
and in all faithfulness.
- 139 My zeal consumes me
because my foes forget your words.
- 140 Your promise is well tried,
and your servant loves it.
- 141 I am small and despised,
yet I do not forget your precepts.
- 142 Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness,
and your law is the truth.
- 143 Trouble and anguish have come upon me,
but your commandments are my delight.
- 144 Your decrees are righteous for ever;
give me understanding that I may live.

Luke 19:1-10

[Jesus] entered Jericho

and was passing through it.

2A man was there named Zacchaeus;

he was a chief tax-collector and was rich.

3He was trying to see who Jesus was,

but on account of the crowd he could not,
because he was short in stature.

4So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him,

because he was going to pass that way.

5When 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.’

6So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

7All who saw it began to grumble and said,

‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’

8Zacchaeus 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.’

9Then Jesus said to him,

‘Today salvation has come to this house,
because he too is a son of Abraham.

10For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.’

Inspired by Luke 19:1-10

**JESUS CAME TO JERICHO
ON HIS WAY TO JERUSALEM.
AND LOOK HERE!
A PERSON CALLED ZACCHAEUS
WAS CHIEF OF TAX COLLECTORS THERE;
AND HE WAS WEALTHY,
AND HE WAS DESPERATE
TO SEE JESUS WHO WAS STANDING NEARBY.
HOWEVER, HE WAS NOT ABLE TO DO THIS
BECAUSE OF THE CROWD,
SINCE HE HAD BEEN A VERY SMALL –
THAT IS TO SAY, A VERY PETTY PERSON.**

**AND RUNNING AHEAD,
HE CLIMBED UP INTO A SYCAMORE TREE
IN ORDER TO SEE JESUS,
BECAUSE THIS GREAT PERSON WAS MOVING ON.**

**AND WHEN JESUS CAME TO THAT JUNCTURE,
HE LOOKED UP,
AND HE SPOKE TO THIS FELLOW,
“ZACCHAEUS, HURRY UP AND CLIMB DOWN!
TODAY, MAYBE?
BECAUSE I MUST STAY WITH YOU!”**

**SO, HE SPEEDILY GOT DOWN
AND JOYFULLY MET UP WITH JESUS.**

**YET, WHEN ‘THEY’ ALL SAW THIS, THEY COMPLAINED,
“NOW HE IS CONSORTING WITH SCUM!”**

**BUT HUMBLY, ZACCHAEUS SAID
TO THE ONE WHO IS CALLED ‘THE LORD’,
“DO YOU SEE ALL THIS?
HALF OF WHAT BELONGS TO ME, LORD,
I WILL GIVE TO THE HOMELESS!
AND ANY PENALTY THAT I EXTORTED,
I WILL PAY BACK FOUR TIMES AS MUCH!”**

**TO HIM, JESUS SAID,
“TODAY, HEALING HAS COME TO THIS HOME,
AS IT SHOULD BE FOR A DESCENDANT
OF ABRAHAM!
BECAUSE OF THIS, THE SON OF MAN,
THE HEIR OF HUMANITY HAS COME
TO SEEK OUT AND RESCUE
THOSE WHO ARE SUFFERING.”**