

Looking for Jesus Luke 19:1-10 Rev. Brian Bagley-Bonner

One of the most delightful things about the Gospels are the minute human details that often accompany the stories. Today is no exception as we are introduced to a Chief Tax Collector named Zacchaeus who is short. He is too short to see Jesus through the crowd so he climbs up a Sycamore Tree in order to see Jesus. One of the reasons Zacchaeus cannot just ask people if he can go to the front is because he is a hated Tax Collector. He spends his day cajoling and threatening people so they pay their taxes to Rome. The Tax Collectors take a cut from what they collect, and if they can pad the amount someone pays, the more they get to keep. This is verified by Zacchaeus himself in the Gospel when he says, "if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." The crowd is not going to let Zacchaeus move up front even if it is to see Jesus.

In last week's Gospel, Jesus told a parable about a righteous tax collector and an unrighteous Pharisee who lacked proper humility before God. This week Jesus literally puts his own words into practice by honoring a Chief Tax Collector by requesting to dine at Zacchaeus' house. Like all Bible stories it is hard for us to really catch how dramatic this is. As I thought about a contemporary parallel I imagined President Obama going to the first World Series Game in Wrigley Field in almost 100 years, and instead of sitting with his fellow Chicagoans to cheer on the Cubs, he went and sat in the midst of some Cleveland Indians fans and cheered for them. A very pedestrian comparison but I am hearing boo's beginning to bubble up at the very thought of it.

Jesus comes to the home and Zacchaeus repents of his evil ways, gives his ill gotten gain to the poor and restores the padded up money he extorted from his people. Jesus tells the people that salvation has come to Zacchaeus because Jesus sought him and supped with him. And Jesus tells us his mission to look for and save the lost. Notice the parallel there, Zacchaeus looked for Jesus up in that tree and because Zacchaeus did that, when Jesus looked through the crowd to see to whom he should minister, Jesus could see Zacchaeus. And so

Every generation must look for Jesus.

"Rabbi Harold Schulweis, of Encino, California was the most influential pulpit rabbi in America until his death last year. He was respected for both his intellect and also his willingness to think and express himself, as they say, "outside the box." A few years ago, he wrote a little book entitled *For Those Who Can't Believe*. Let me read for you one excerpt:

"I propose a shift of focus, from noun to verb, from subject to predicate, from God as a person to Godliness...Godliness is exhibited in the activities of doing justly, healing the sick, raising the fallen,

supporting the disadvantaged.... To believe in Godliness is to believe in the verbs that refer to the activities of God. To behave in a Godly fashion is to realize in one's own life the attributes of Godliness that are present in all human energies...the question to be asked of those who seek God is not whether they believe in the noun that cannot be known but whether they believe in the verbs of Godliness: healing the sick, feeding the hungry, supporting the fallen, pursuing peace, loving the neighbor...If we know anything about God, it is not God the noun but God the verb, not God the unknowable but God's knowable qualities that may be reflected in human behavior."

What Rabbi Schuweis suggested is that we should try to do away with the conventional assumption that God behaves as a Personality, with His own reasons and emotions.

Luke 19:1-10

He 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."