The Meaning of our Faith and Why it Matters
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Luke 19:1-10

There are some Bible passages that leave a lasting impression on one’s life and ministry. Luke 19 verses 1-10, the encounter between Zacchaeus (the Tax Collector) and Jesus, is such a passage for me.

My first encounter with this story left its imprint on my heart during a memorable worship experience. It came during my third year of ministry when my uncle, the Rev. Donald Morgan, invited me to preach in his pulpit at the historic Congregational Church of Old Wethersfield CT, an extraordinary church with over 3,000 members and a historic Meetinghouse that harkened back to colonial days with candlelit chandeliers, enclosed pews, and pew boxes around the perimeter, where family members faced one another and in olden days tried to keep warm around warming trays of hot rocks during the three-hour worship services.

Needless to say, I felt deeply honored!

I still remember climbing the 12 steps (!) of the magnificent ten-foot-high pulpit, which stood in the middle of the Wethersfield Meetinghouse, its prominence heralding the primacy of the Word.

Ascending those well-worn stairs clutching my sermon based on the text for that morning, Luke 19:1-10, I felt prepared to reveal the full power of our faith – secretly hoping to impress my uncle and his eager and faithful congregation. “Is this Donald’s nephew? I guess it like they say, ‘Like uncle like nephew!’”

Standing high upon my perch, I dug deep into the rich soils of my family’s dramatic heritage and began my sermon by reenacting that 2,000-year-old Biblical scene recorded in Luke. “Zacchaeus, Come down from that tree!!” I cried. Wanting to bring home the authority of his words by emulating Jesus himself, I repeated his command in my best messiah-like voice, “Zacchaeus… I said come down from that tree!”

Well, my dramatic rendition received a strong reaction to be sure…just not the one I anticipated.

In a family box in the back left corner of the Meetinghouse, a young boy determined that my attempt to channel Jesus was in fact a much clearer illustration of a 28-year-old circus clown. And so, after the second command left my lips, he burst out laughing! He laughed and laughed. He just couldn’t help himself, having witnessed the funniest thing he had ever seen in his seven short years on this earth!

This unrelenting outburst of joyous emotion continued for some time in the corner box despite the attempts of his desperate parents to “shush!” him into submission. Eventually his father decided the best way to preserve the sanctity of the service and save his family’s reputation was to physically remove his son from the scene, which he did to the best of his ability.

It wasn’t easy.
I remember the embarrassed and yet determined father, who had neither the time nor patience to get a better grip on his now gyrating and still laughing son, finally was able to lift his boy by the waist and carry him sideways out of the Meetinghouse, like a hysterical sack of potatoes. On his way out, the father, still holding his horizontal son, deftly maneuvered like Thomas Tyner around concerned ushers who rushed in to help. With due haste he made his way to the side exit and onto the 125 foot-long corridor of marble and glass that echoed his son’s jubilant song back down and into the Meetinghouse for another minute or so to the delight of the now giggling congregation.

Silence came with the pronounced slam of the church parlor door at the far end of the hall. I remember thinking that maybe we should offer a prayer for that poor boy! Honestly, though somewhat traumatized, I could truly understand, even appreciate, this young boy’s reaction. I think I would have laughed as long and as hard if I had caught a glimpse of myself that morning!

Well, needless to say, I no longer had any illusions of being the reincarnation of Jesus that morning. Like our brother Zacchaeus, I felt very small and exposed in that tree of a pulpit, which is where I should have started in the first place. For that is where the true power of our faith can be discovered in this passage because it proclaims that we worship a God who embraces us no matter who we are and meets us wherever we may be on our faith journey. A God who helps us down from whatever ways we have puffed ourselves up – or left ourselves precariously exposed. We worship a God whose all-encompassing love, clearly shown by the life and ministry of Jesus, is capable of transforming lives. A God whose Spirit can be felt right here and right now, empowering us and making possible what is deemed impossible.

Yes, the power of that passage in Luke was not the command for Zacchaeus to come down out of his tree. The beauty of that encounter was how Zacchaeus felt recognized and seen, perhaps for the first time, and that he was accepted for who he was and didn’t need to measure up to any standard of what it meant to live a pious life to know God’s love. And then something truly surprising happened… feeling the love of God in his heart for the first time…. knowing he was embraced as a child of God… Zacchaeus was transformed as a person of faith.

This was no small surprise, especially to the people who knew him, because Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector for the Roman government in the prospering city of Jericho. He probably had a staff of collectors, and he was, very possibly, the most hated person in the city. He worked for the occupying forces, and he was regarded as a traitor to his own people. He and his cohorts could stop a person in Jericho and assess duties on nearly everything in his or her possession. A cart, for instance, could be taxed for each wheel, for the animal that pulled it, and for the merchandise that it carried. He would send in a portion of his collections, and anything over that amount he was free to keep. The system was ripe for abuse, and this passage tersely states: "he was wealthy" as if that were some kind of indictment… and it was. He had accumulated his wealth in service to the invaders and at the expense of his own people, who regarded him as a pariah.

Zacchaeus, whose name meant "the pure one" and "the righteous," had transformed his good name into a sneer on the lips of his fellow Jews. The money was nice, to be sure. But he lived as an outcast among his own people, with no one to call a friend…no involvement with others except those who wanted to use him for their own ends.

And then Jesus came to town and Zacchaeus felt compelled to see this Rabbi he heard so much about.

Now he may have been trying to get a better view of Jesus by climbing that sycamore tree as the scriptures say. But I also think it is highly likely he was trying to remain hidden in the branches from his fellow townspeople.
Then something remarkable happened that day, because much to his shock (and initial concern) he heard Jesus call his name, and in that brief encounter Zacchaeus felt seen and embraced by Jesus. He was lifted up when he came down out of that tree… and his life was changed forever.

This is the true message of our Christian faith and it is a powerful, life-changing story. Both then and now.

As you know, Lisa and I have been having some get-togethers at our home recently. (I honestly wonder what our neighbors are thinking. First, we put out on the street all the empty boxes we used to pack our stuff in, which happened to be about a hundred liqueur boxes, which we deemed strong enough and of the right size. Now we are having all these big parties at our home…. sometimes seven in a week! **Wait till they find out I am a pastor!** Needless to say, I am anticipating an influx of visitors from our neighborhood soon!)

Honestly, these get-togethers have been a wonderful way to get to know each other and begin our journey of faith together. **And for me, they have been truly inspiring. Because I have heard your stories…**

Tales of delight having found a community of faith that does not judge or require certain boxes to be checked to fit in, but rather a church that accepts you for who you are and where you are on your faith journey – no exceptions! Tales of desired embrace when you felt beaten down by the challenges and hardships that life can bring. Stories of how this church has made a difference in the world through our outreach and care for all our brothers and sisters.

They have been truly inspiring to me!

Friends, next week is Consecration Sunday. As you prayerfully reflect about how you plan to support this ministry, **know that hearts are being touched, wounds are being healed, and lives are being changed in this place and in all the places that God has guided us to serve.** So, let us come together with exuberant, child-like joy to give generously from our hearts to this ministry that means so much to us.

For like our brother Zacchaeus, we know a God who reached out in love and surprised us with gifts of unending help and confidence, putting a fresh heart in us.

Yes, the power of God’s love empowered Zacchaeus to transform his life and live life as a generous caring soul…

How will it empower us?