

The 20 First Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: October 30, 2022

Proper 26: Luke 19:10: *God's Love you anyway!*

Preached

By

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN!

Let me ask you an uncomfortable question this morning: what criticism are you most likely to hear from the people who know you best? Do they say you are always running late, or you're always too uptight, or you are always being early or late? Or are you a piker, a penny pincher, or are you always overspending? Very few of us handle criticism graciously, even from people who know us and love us. But, honest criticism is hard to take, particularly from a relative, a friend, an acquaintance, or even a stranger. It makes you wince. Criticism is hard to take, especially if it's unwarranted. Some people can always find something to complain about, can't they? Winston Churchill served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom during World War II, and he was very well-respected at the time. But in his later years, rumors of health problems caused him a lot of trouble. One evening Churchill was attending

some official function, and two men a few rows behind him began speculating about his health. One man said to the other, “That is Winston Churchill. They say he is senile. They say he is a drunk. They say he should step down and let younger men run the government. They say he is over the hill.” At the end of the program, Churchill turned around and scowled at the men and said, “They also say Churchill is going deaf!”

Jesus did not have a hearing problem. He knew that he was the target of criticism. And what was the number one criticism people had about him? That he liked to hang out with sinners. It wasn't a rumor; it was the truth. Jesus' critics had plenty of proof, just like in today's Luke's Gospel 19: 1-10. Jesus liked to hang out with sinners. I would just like to say, thank the Lord for that, since you and I are among that crowd of sinners.

Our Gospel story today centers around a man named Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in Jericho. Last week, we talked about why tax collectors were so hated by the Jewish community. They worked for the oppressive Roman government, and they often collected excessively high taxes. They gave the Roman government its required amount, then kept the excess for themselves. As we learned last week, tax collectors were excommunicated from the synagogue. They couldn't participate in the religious and social supports of

their community. Our Bible passage says that Zacchaeus was wealthy, so it's likely he was profiting off the exploitation and oppression of his neighbors. I would guess he earned the title, The least Popular Guy in Jericho.

I think that explains why Zacchaeus didn't want Jesus to see him. These Gospel verses tell us that Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd. It's reasonable to assume he could have gotten close enough to talk to Jesus or touch him.

Instead, he climbed up a sycamore-fig tree because he was very short. He wanted to see Jesus, but I don't think he really wanted Jesus to see him. Get my drift here. There are a lot of people who feel that they are unacceptable to God. That's the first insight we get from today's story. There are many people who feel that they are unacceptable to God. Maybe you feel that way. You come to church searching for something, but you're afraid to commit to anything. You're afraid to let anyone get to know you. You're afraid someone will discover that you are "not a REAL Christian.

A story, about 5 years ago, I was preparing a lovely couple for their wedding. At the last of our preparations, the groom broke down in tears and he blurted out, "Fr. John, I confess, I am not a Christian. My parents didn't take me to a church for my Baptism." He said, "I was struggling when I was born at home and my parents thought I might die." They put water over my head and said,

“Luis, we baptized you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen!” There was no priest.” I said, “Luis, you have wonderful parents because they baptized you when you were struggling after your delivery and your baptism was valid and you have been a Christian from that very moment. Unfortunately, there are plenty of people outside these church walls who feel that way. They think they have gone too far from God. The real tragedy is, someone in their life may have told them that. One of the most destructive lies we can believe about ourselves is, “I am not worthy of God’s love.”

A story, in the early days of the AIDS crisis, Fr. Ted Karpf was serving as an Episcopal priest in the Diocese of Texas. One evening a man showed up at his church door. The man’s thin face bore the gaunt characteristic of sores and bruises of AIDS. He had a question for Fr. Ted: “Will you allow me to come to your church and die here?” He had already visited six other churches that night. All had turned him away. Fr. Ted hesitated. Like many people, he was afraid. Not much was known about the disease at this stage in the 1980’s, and the fear was driving a lot of hateful behavior. AIDS patients were losing their jobs, getting kicked out of their churches, facing harassment and death threats. But then Fr. Ted remembered Jesus’ love for lepers, for the sick, for all those who were unacceptable in their society. And he simply said, “My

church is open to you. I will stand by you.” He discovered later that this man planned to commit suicide in the church, to die in a peaceful and beautiful place. But the man was so moved by Fr. Ted’s acceptance that he changed his mind. Not everybody in his church was ready to accept this man. Attendance dropped drastically. But when the dust settled, twenty-one members of the church remained and committed themselves to caring for this man until his death. He died knowing that he was accepted by a community and surrounded by the love of God. And that brings me to the second insight we get from today’s Gospel: one of the greatest truths Jesus came to teach us is, “God loves you anyway.” No matter what you have done, no matter how unacceptable you feel, God loves you anyway. See how Jesus treated people who were considered nobodies or outsiders? He’s showing us a picture of what God would do if God were to walk into our lives.

My sisters and brothers in Christ, our hearts may condemn us. Others may reject us. God loves us anyway. And Zacchaeus was about to discover that in the most surprising way. Starting with verse 5 we read, “When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, ‘Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.’ So, he came down from that tree at once and welcomed him gladly. “All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.’”

Remember, Jesus was surrounded by a crowd. He could have used this moment to preach a rousing sermon, or perform a few healings, or challenge the local religious leaders to a debate. At least he could have done something to help his reputation. But no, he does the exact opposite. Jesus uses this moment to show love to the Least Popular Guy in Jericho. Because Jesus never passed up a chance to show people the heart of God. And remember, no matter how unacceptable we may feel we are, God loves us anyway.

I think that's Zacchaeus spent the rest of his life, trying to be the person Jesus saw in him. The love of God changes lives. It always has. It always will. A person exposed to grace the unconditional, unearned, undeserved love of God will be changed by it. So, when Zacchaeus is confronted by grace in the form of Jesus Christ, we shouldn't be surprised by the transformation in his life.

Let's return to Gospel beginning in verse 8: "But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.' "Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.'" That brings me to the final insight we get from today's story. And for this, I'm just going to steal Jesus' very words: "For the

Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” Please, my brothers and sisters, please memorize these words. Inscribe them in your brain, inscribe them in your heart, inscribe them in all the dark places where you believe you are unacceptable to God. “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Yes indeed, to seek and to save. We need both verbs “to seek and to save” to understand God’s love. Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” That’s what he said. That’s what he meant. That’s what he did. And that’s what he wants his followers to do also.

A few years ago, the folks at St. Gregory of Nyssa Episcopal Church in San Francisco decided they would follow Jesus’ lead and go look for people who wanted to meet Jesus but would never walk in the church doors. The church’s Rector, Paul Fromberg and the former Director of Ministry, Sara Miles, went to the busy San Francisco transit stations on Good Friday. They carried with them little bowls of ashes. And as commuters rushed past them, Fromberg and Miles offered to make the sign of the cross on their foreheads and pray for them. Sounds crazy, doesn’t it? Almost as crazy as inviting yourself to the home of the Least Popular Guy in Jericho. And yet people stopped and received the sign of the cross in ashes. They asked for and received prayer. They talked about their faith, or their faith struggles, or their rejection of

God. But they stopped to talk. They stopped to listen. It turns out, a lot of people who never go inside a church were still looking for God. And so many people who were touched by their ministry said, “Never before have we had the church come to us,” or “We couldn’t make it to church, but you brought God to us.” Here is a question and a challenge my sisters and brothers in Christ. Can you get out of your Zacchaeus Tree and can you bring God to someone you know, a child, a teenager, your neighbor, co-worker, talk to them about your church and invite them anyone to come to Holy Trinity Church? Can you do this and bring God to someone who needs you. That was Jesus’ mission? Please don’t believe the lie that you are unacceptable to God. One of the greatest truths Jesus came to teach us is, “God loves you anyway.” No matter what your feelings say. No matter what others say. No matter whether you deserve it or not, God loves you anyway. That’s the whole reason God became flesh in the form of Jesus Christ. “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” If you are looking for Jesus and even if you’re not, I guarantee you, Jesus is looking for you. And if you have received the love of God through Jesus Christ, then someone is waiting for you, looking for you to share the love and hope of Jesus and change their life too. AMEN.