

October 30, 2016

Reformation Sunday, Presentation of Bibles, Installation of Church Council

Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church

Luke 19:1-10

### **To See and Be Seen**

Today we hear about Zacchaeus, the tax collector. Last Sunday's gospel also had a tax collector, and we noted that in Jesus' day tax collectors were not well liked: they worked for the oppressor, Rome. They took money from their fellow Jews and gave it to the foreign invader. And they made good money at it. Or, perhaps, they made bad money at it: collected extra and kept it for themselves.

Today, like last week, we have a tax collector in the gospel, but this one is specifically named and more particularly described. There was a tax collector named Zacchaeus, the story says, and he was rich. There's often an unease surrounding people of means. And he was short. In ways subtle and not and maybe especially for men, height affects how we experience and interact with one another. In addition to profession, and financial situation, stature can affect the way we are received and perceived. We don't know all the ways these played out for Zacchaeus, except for one way, one day, today: the day he saw Jesus, and Jesus saw him.

To see Jesus, Zacchaeus needed to do something odd. Crowds of people had gathered around Jesus, blocking Zacchaeus's view, so he climbed a tree. Grown men, prominent men, wealthy men, do not usually climb trees to see better, but Zacchaeus did. You have to wonder if he was a little embarrassed as he did it. Did he try to hide behind the branches? But of course he couldn't hide. For here's an interesting thing about this story, even more notable than his climbing a tree—and it happens at the tree: Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, and Jesus sees him. "Come on down," Jesus says. "I'm coming to your house. Today we are going to celebrate."

Today is Bible Sunday, here at Irving Park Lutheran Church. Every year one Sunday in the fall we give out Bibles to our shorter members—to our children. We have different versions for different ages, board books and story books and then grown up Bibles, which we give those to our first year confirmands, those children who are acquiring a grown up faith. Every Bible that we're giving out today has the child's name in it; the confirmand's Bible had their name custom imprinted on the cover. Not one of those Bibles went to a child named Zacchaeus, but every one of those Bibles is like the tree that Zacchaeus climbed. Like that tree, the Bibles help us see Jesus. We can read stories about Jesus in the Bible, and we see who he is: God with us. We can see what God does, who he came to seek out and save. We see that, when we read the Bible.

But here's an interesting thing about the Bible, which is also like what happened in the story of Zacchaeus: When we read the Bible, God sees us. When we read the Bible, when we climb that tree, we see how God sees us—and there's no hiding behind the branches. God sees the ways we shortchange our neighbors. God sees the way we've made a world of haves and have nots, when God's call throughout the Bible is for equity and justice. When we read the Bible we see how God sees us.

And what does God do? "Come on down," Jesus calls. "Come on down, Zacchaeus." And Zacchaeus comes down; Zacchaeus is honored, happy, eager to welcome Jesus.

But others grumbled; called Zacchaeus a sinner. Another interesting thing about this story: it wasn't Jesus who said that, it wasn't Jesus who called Zacchaeus a sinner. It was the

other people, the ones blocking the way. They were the ones who called Zacchaeus a sinner. Interesting, too, when you consider the situation that Zacchaeus was in, the constricted system in which he was put. It wasn't fair, but it was the world in which he lived, and he made a living off of it. In fact he richly benefitted from it: he profited from the colonization of a land, and an empire's accruing wealth, and a system that rewards self-interest. Some might point out how much that sounds like the story of America. We may not all be rich, but most of us probably have something in common with this tax collector. In one way or another, every one of us live in a constricted system. We all are part of it, and we are all belittled by it. In this way the crowd was right: they were right about Zacchaeus, right about all of us: sinners.

And Jesus chooses to eat with him, Jesus decides to visit him, to stay with him.

And Zacchaeus says, "I give half of my possessions...and not defraud... and repay four times." Zacchaeus announces a reformed life, a life of incredible generosity born out of his joy, starting right then and there. Note though, that that announcement by Zacchaeus, that new life of his, that comes after what Jesus does, after Jesus sees him. Before Zacchaeus announced anything about his possessions and financial practices, before Zacchaeus hurried down out of the tree, before Zacchaeus had even adjusted himself amidst its poking branches, before Zacchaeus could do anything but let go of his pride and clamber up a trunk, Jesus sees him, calls him by name, proclaims that he came to be with him.

When we read the Bible, we see that, too. We see that God knows just who we are, knows all the ways that we diminish ourselves, knows that we need his company. God knows all that about us, and before we can do anything, God loves us—not because of what we do, but because of who God is. That's the righteousness of God, as it says in the book of Romans.

That's what Martin Luther saw when he read the Bible. You may know that story. You may read it again in a book we're giving out to everybody today. It's a free gift for you today, no matter your height, we have one for each household, a graphic novel of the story of Martin Luther. (If you didn't get one yet, head to the back of the church right after worship.) Its comic book format may look child-like, but they are not just for children. They vividly, substantively tell the story of Luther and the movement of which he was such a part.

We're giving them out today, for today is Reformation Sunday. Today we celebrate, not because we are Lutheran, but because God is righteous. We celebrate because before anything else, this is how God sees us: in love, with love, so much love that God climbed a tree; God climbed a cross. He could see the whole world from it, and he calls from that tree, to us all: "Today salvation has come."