

Luke 19:1-10
March 21, '10

LENTEN LESSONS FROM LUKE
"GOING OUT ON A LIMB"

(Before scripture)

DURING LENT THIS YEAR, WE'VE FOCUSING ON PASSAGES FROM LUKE'S GOSPEL & CALLING IT "LENTEN LESSONS FROM LUKE."

WE'RE FOLLOWING THE LECTIONARY GOSPEL READINGS FOR EACH SUNDAY, BUT THIS SUNDAY WE'VE RUN INTO A PROBLEM.

WHILE THE GOSPEL LESSONS SUGGESTED BY THE LECTIONARY HAVE ALL BEEN FROM LUKE, TODAY'S IS FROM JOHN.

THAT CLEARLY DOESN'T FIT IN A SERIES ENTITLED "LENTEN LESSONS FROM LUKE," SO I'VE CHOSEN A DIFFERENT PASSAGE – ONE THAT IS FOUND A FEW CHAPTERS AFTER LAST SUNDAY'S BUT IMMEDIATELY PRIOR TO THE EVENTS OF PALM SUNDAY.

OUR SCRIPTURE READING IS LUKE 19:1-10.

(After scripture)

YOU'RE GOING TO GET A TWO-FER TODAY – TWO SERMONS FOR THE PRICE OF ONE.

BEFORE YOU START RUSHING FOR THE EXITS, LET ME HASTEN TO ADD THAT EACH OF THE TWO SERMONS WILL BE ONLY HALF THE LENGTH OF A REGULAR SERMON SO TIMEWISE, THEY'LL EQUAL ONE.

THERE'S OBVIOUSLY A REASON FOR DOING THIS.

I WANT TO OFFER WHAT WOULD, I BELIEVE, BE A REGULAR SERMON ABOUT THIS PASSAGE – THE MESSAGE BEING SOMETHING YOU MIGHT EXPECT TO HEAR AT ANOTHER TIME WHEN THIS PASSAGE WAS PREACHED.

THE FIRST SERMON WILL PROBABLY BE THE MOST LOGICAL WAY TO VIEW THIS EVENT.

BUT THE REASON I FEEL COMPELLED TO PREACH A SECOND SERMON IS BECAUSE THERE ARE A COUPLE OF THINGS IN THIS PASSAGE THAT HAVE ALWAYS TROUBLED ME & I THINK THOSE THINGS ARE AT LEAST WORTHY OF EXPLORATION.

OKAY – LET'S GET ON WITH IT.

SERMON NUMBER ONE.

ZACCHAEUS. HIS VERY NAME BRINGS A SMILE TO YOUR FACE.

IF WE WERE CASTING HIM IN A MOVIE, THE PART WOULD PROBABLY GO TO DANNY DEVITO.

YOU KNOW HIM FROM THE LITTLE SUNDAY SCHOOL SONG – "ZACCHAEUS WAS A WEE LITTLE MAN

& A WEE LITTLE MAN WAS HE.

HE CLIMBED UP IN A SYCAMORE TREE

TO SEE WHAT HE COULD SEE."

IT APPEARS AS THOUGH LUKE WANTS US TO LIKE ZACCHAEUS – AND WE DO.

BUT NOT UNTIL THE END OF THE STORY – NOT UNTIL ZACCHAEUS TELLS JESUS HE’S GOING TO DO THE RIGHT THING & TURN FROM HIS EVIL BEHAVIOR.

AS A TAX-COLLECTOR, ZACCHAEUS WAS PERHAPS THE MOST HATED MAN IN ALL OF JERICHO.

HE WASN’T JUST A TAX COLLECTOR – HE WAS THE *CHIEF* TAX COLLECTOR, WHICH MEANS HE PROBABLY HAD A STAFF OF UNDERLINGS WHO WORKED FOR HIM.

HE WAS EMPLOYED BY THE ROMAN GOVERNMENT.

HE WORKED FOR THE OCCUPYING FORCES & WAS SEEN AS A TRAITOR BY HIS PEOPLE.

HE HAD ACCUMULATED HIS WEALTH IN SERVICE TO THE INVADERS & AT THE EXPENSE OF HIS COUNTRYMEN.

HE WAS PUT IN THE SAME CLASS AS MURDERERS, THEIVES & PROSTITUTES.

HE WAS REGARDED AS HUMAN FILTH.

IS IT ANY WONDER THAT PEOPLE WERE SHOCKED & DISAPPOINTED WHEN JESUS ANNOUNCED THAT HE WAS GOING TO SPEND THE DAY WITH ZACCHAEUS!?

HERE WAS THE MAN WHOSE MINISTRY WAS TO THE POOR & DOWNTRODDEN.

HERE WAS THE MAN WHO SAID “BLESSED ARE THE POOR” – THE MAN WHO JUST A FEW VERSES BEFORE HAD SAID, *“IT IS EASIER FOR A CAMEL TO GO THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE THAN A RICH MAN TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.”*

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS HE DOING IN THE HOME OF A MAN LIKE ZACCHAEUS!?

AND, FROM THE OTHER SIDE, WHY DID ZACCHAEUS WANT TO SEE JESUS SO BADLY THAT HE WOULD CLIMB A TREE – GO OUT ON A LIMB – JUST TO BE ABLE TO SEE HIM AS HE PASSED?

MAYBE HE’D HEARD THAT ONE OF THE FOLLOWERS OF JESUS – A MAN NAMED MATTHEW – WAS A FORMER TAX COLLECTOR HIMSELF.

WHATEVER IT WAS, ZACCHAEUS HAD THE CHANCE TO SEE JESUS & JESUS DIDN’T WAIT FOR AN INVITATION FROM ZACCHAEUS.

HE STOPS HIS JOURNEY, LOOKS UP INTO THE TREE & CALLS OUT, *“ZACCHAEUS – HURRY & COME DOWN BECAUSE I’M HAVING DINNER WITH YOU TODAY.”*

IT SOUNDS LIKE ONE CHILD SAYING TO ANOTHER, *“HEY, I’VE GOT AN IDEA! LET’S GO PLAY AT YOUR HOUSE!”*

WITH THESE WORDS & THIS SELF-INVITATION, JESUS IS GOING OUT ON A LIMB AS MUCH AS ZACCHAEUS IS.

WHAT HAPPENS IF THE VISIT IS A FAILURE?

WHAT HAPPENS IF, WHEN JESUS LEAVES, ZACCHAEUS IS THE SAME MAN HE WAS WHEN JESUS ARRIVED?

GIVEN THE REPUTATION OF THIS – THE MOST HATED MAN IN JERICHO – JESUS WAS SURELY GOING OUT ON A LIMB TO SPEND THE DAY WITH ZACCHAEUS!

BUT THE END RESULT IS THAT ZACCHAEUS WAS A CHANGED MAN AS A RESULT OF THIS ENCOUNTER.

WHAT HE SAYS WHEN JESUS LEAVES IS THAT HE WILL REPAY 4 TIMES WHAT HE HAD STOLEN FROM ANYONE.

THIS WAS TWICE WHAT WAS REQUIRED OF HIM BY OLD TESTAMENT LAW.

ON TOP OF THAT, HE SAYS HE'S GOING TO GIVE HALF OF EVERYTHING HE HAS TO THE POOR.

WE'RE LEFT THINKING THAT IF HE CAN DO THIS, HE CERTAINLY WAS A VERY, VERY WEALTHY MAN!

WHAT HAPPENED TO ZACCHAEUS?

WHAT TOOK PLACE AT HIS HOUSE THAT CHANGED HIM?

THIS IS ONE OF THOSE TIMES WHEN YOU'D LOVE TO HAVE THE SCOOP FROM INSIDE THE WALLS OF THAT HOUSE – A FIRST HAND ACCOUNT OF THE CONVERSATION THAT TOOK PLACE BETWEEN THE CHRIST & THE CROOK.

CLEARLY, JESUS SAW SOMETHING THAT NO ONE SAW.

HE SAW SOMETHING THAT NOT EVEN ZACCHAEUS HIMSELF SAW.

HE SAW – NOT WHO ZACCHAEUS WAS – BUT WHO HE COULD BECOME.

HE SAW HIM – NOT AS A WEE LITTLE MAN – BUT AS A GIANT OF A MAN.

WHEN JESUS SAYS, *“TODAY, SALVATION HAS COME TO THIS HOUSE...”* HE'S SAYING SOMETHING THAT WE FIND ALL THROUGH THE GOSPEL OF LUKE.

“TODAY” IS AN IMPORTANT WORD IN LUKE.

BACK IN THE SECOND CHAPTER, IN THE PASSAGE OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS THAT WE KNOW SO WELL, WE HEAR THE ANGELS ANNOUNCE TO THE SHEPHERDS, *“TODAY, IN THE CITY OF DAVID A SAVIOR HAS BEEN BORN...”*

WHEN JESUS GOES TO THE TEMPLE & READS FROM THE PROPHET ISAIAH, HE CONCLUDES BY SAYING, *“TODAY, THIS SCRIPTURE IS FULFILLED...”*

AS HE HUNG ON THE CROSS, HE SAID TO ONE WHO HUNG WITH HIM, *“TODAY, YOU WILL BE WITH ME IN PARADISE...”*

“TODAY” IS BIG IN LUKE.

AND IT'S BIG IN THIS STORY OF ZACCHAEUS.

JESUS SAYS, *“TODAY, SALVATION HAS COME TO THIS HOUSE...”*

SUDDENLY, ZACCHAEUS IS ABLE TO SEE HIMSELF AS JESUS SEES HIM – AS A MAN CAPABLE OF A LIFE SO MUCH DIFFERENT FROM THE ONE HE'S NOW LIVING.

ZACCHAEUS WENT OUT ON A LIMB TO SEE JESUS.

JESUS WENT OUT ON A LIMB TO SAVE ZACCHAEUS.

IT WAS IN THE PRECEDING CHAPTER THAT JESUS SAID, *“IT IS HARDER FOR A RICH MAN TO ENTER THE KINGDOM OF GOD THAN FOR A CAMEL TO GO THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE. BUT WITH GOD, ALL THINGS ARE POSSIBLE.”*

AND HERE, THE IMPOSSIBLE HAPPENS – A RICH MAN GOES THROUGH THE EYE OF A NEEDLE & HIS LIFE IS TRANSFORMED.

JESUS IS WILLING TO GO OUT ON A LIMB FOR YOU, TOO.

ARE YOU WILLING TO GO OUT ON A LIMB FOR HIM? AMEN.

+++++

OKAY, NOT SO FAST.

I PROMISED YOU A SECOND SERMON & I KNOW YOU'D BE DISAPPOINTED IF I FAILED TO FULFILL THAT PROMISE.

FOR SOME OF YOU THAT MAY NOT BE TRUE – THAT YOU'D BE DISAPPOINTED IF I DIDN'T FULFILL THE PROMISE OF A SECOND SERMON.

I TALKED TO SOMEONE RECENTLY, THOUGH, - SOMEONE WHO WORSHIPS HERE MOST EVERY SUNDAY – AND HE SAID EACH WEEK, HE THINKS TO HIMSELF, *“IS IT ALREADY OVER!? I'M NOT READY TO LEAVE YET!”*

EVERY PREACHER'S DREAM!

BUT I KNOW THERE ARE THOSE WHO WOULDN'T MIND A SHORTER SERVICE, SO LET'S GET ON WITH THAT SECOND SERMON YOU WERE PROMISED.

YOU'VE ALREADY HEARD THE SCRIPTURE FOR TODAY – LUKE 19:1-10.

IMAGINE THIS SCENARIO – LITTLE 7-YEAR-OLD JARRETT SETTLE IS WALKING DOWN THE CENTER AISLE OF THE SANCTUARY, AND HE'S SURROUNDED BY ALL THE BIG KIDS & EVEN SOME ADULTS.

JARRETT IS SMACK DAB IN THE MIDDLE OF THEM ALL.

YOU PROBABLY WOULDN'T BE ABLE TO SEE HIM, WOULD YOU, BECAUSE, BY COMPARISON, HE'S “SHORT IN STATURE.”

THIS IS SOMETHING THAT HAS ALWAYS TROUBLED ME ABOUT THIS PASSAGE IN LUKE'S GOSPEL.

HE SAYS, *“HE WAS TRYING TO SEE WHO JESUS WAS, BUT ON ACCOUNT OF THE CROWD HE COULD NOT, BECAUSE HE WAS SHORT IN STATURE.”*

WHAT HAS ALWAYS TROUBLED ME IS, WHO WAS SHORT?

I'M GOING TO GO OUT ON A LIMB & ASK - WAS IT ZACCHAEUS OR WAS IT JESUS?

WE DON'T REALLY KNOW FROM THE CONTEXT OF THE SENTENCE, DO WE?

“HE WAS SHORT IN STATURE...” COULD REFER TO EITHER ONE OF THEM.

“AHA!” YOU'RE QUICK TO POINT OUT. *“IT SAYS THAT ZACCHAEUS CLIMBED THE TREE TO SEE HIM, SO THAT MUST MEAN THAT IT WAS ZACCHAEUS WHO WAS SHORT.”*

NOT NECESSARILY.

GO BACK TO THE SCENE I SUGGESTED.

IF YOU COULDN'T SEE JARRETT WHO WAS SHORT IN STATURE COMPARED TO THOSE AROUND HIM, YOU MIGHT BE TEMPTED TO CLIMB UP ON THE WINDOW SILL IF YOU REALLY WANTED TO CATCH A GLIMPSE OF HIM.

NOW I'M NOT SAYING IT WAS JESUS WHO WAS SHORT – I'M JUST SAYING THAT, FROM THE CONTEXT OF THE SENTENCE, WE DON'T KNOW.

AND I'M GUESSING THAT IF YOU'RE TROUBLED BY THAT, IT'S NOT BECAUSE YOU'RE TROUBLED BY THE POSSIBILITY THAT ZACCHAEUS WASN'T SHORT AS MUCH AS BY THE POSSIBILITY THAT JESUS WAS.

THAT'S INTERESTING, ISN'T IT?

NOWHERE ARE WE TOLD ANYTHING ABOUT WHAT JESUS LOOKED LIKE & YET WE HAVE OUR OWN IMAGE OF HIS APPEARANCE, DON'T WE?

I HAVE A BOOK IN MY STUDY ENTITLED THE FACES OF JESUS.

IT SHOWS THE WAY PEOPLE OF ALL GENERATIONS & ALL NATIONS HAVE DEPICTED JESUS & IT'S FASCINATING TO SEE THAT JESUS ALWAYS LOOKS LIKE PEOPLE OF THE TIME PERIOD & GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION OF THE ARTIST!

A FEW YEARS AGO, "POPULAR MECHANICS" MAGAZINE DID A THOROUGH, SCIENTIFIC STUDY TO COME UP WITH THE MOST LIKELY LOOK FOR JESUS.

INTERESTINGLY, HE LOOKED A LOT LIKE DANNY DEVITO, WHOM YOU MAY RECALL FROM A PREVIOUS SERMON ON THIS VERY PASSAGE, WE SUGGESTED AS THE ACTOR TO PLAY ZACCHAEUS!

THAT'S JUST ONE ASPECT OF THIS PASSAGE THAT HAS ALWAYS TROUBLED ME.

THERE ARE OTHERS.

WHEN WE COME TO THE END OF THIS PASSAGE & ZACCHAEUS FINALLY SPEAKS, HIS WORDS ARE RATHER INTERESTING.

IN THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION, HE SAYS, "*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.*"

NOW, ORDINARILY, I THINK THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION IS THE MOST ACCURATE TRANSLATION AVAILABLE.

BUT HERE, I'M AFRAID, THEY'VE TAKEN A LIBERTY THAT ISN'T WARRANTED BY THE TEXT.

THE VERB TENSE IS NOT FUTURE, BUT PRESENT.

WHAT ZACCHAEUS ACTUALLY SAYS IS, "*LOOK, HALF OF MY POSSESSIONS, LORD, I GIVE TO THE POOR & IF I HAVE DEFRAUDED ANYONE OF ANYTHING I PAY BACK FOUR TIMES AS MUCH.*"

DO YOU NOTICE THE DIFFERENCE?

IT'S NOT "*I WILL DO SUCH-AND-SUCH FROM NOW ON.*"

HE'S SAYING "*THIS IS MY CURRENT PRACTICE. THIS IS THE KIND OF TAX COLLECTOR I AM.*"

THIS DOESN'T SIT WELL WITH US, DOES IT?

AND SURELY IT DIDN'T SIT WELL WITH THE PEOPLE OF JERICHO EITHER.

IT SHATTERS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHO ZACCHAEUS WAS.

TO US, ZACCHAEUS WAS THE BAD GUY & THOSE WHO DESPISED HIM HAD EVERY RIGHT TO FEEL THE WAY THEY DID.

I'M GOING TO GO OUT ON A LIMB HERE & SUGGEST THAT IT'S POSSIBLE THAT WHEN JESUS LOOKS AT ZACCHAEUS & SAYS THAT HE CAME TO "SEEK OUT & SAVE THE LOST," THIS MAY BE MORE AN INDICTMENT OF THE GRUMBLING CROWD THAN IT WAS OF ZACCHAEUS.

PERHAPS THEY HATED HIM WITHOUT REALLY KNOWING HIM – WITHOUT EVER GIVING HIM A CHANCE.

"HE'S A TAX COLLECTOR SO HE MUST BE A THIEF."

THINK OF THE COUNTLESS WAYS WE DO THE SAME THING.

HOW OFTEN DO WE LOOK AT SOMEONE & DRAW CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THEM BECAUSE OF THE WAY THEY DRESS, OR WHERE THEY LIVE OR WHAT KIND OF CAR THEY DRIVE OR THE WORK THEY DO OR THEIR HERITAGE OR RACE OR RELIGION OR ANY ONE OF A DOZEN OR MORE CATEGORIES INTO WHICH WE CHOOSE TO PLACE A PERSON.

YOU DON'T LIKE THIS SUGGESTION, DO YOU?

YOU DON'T LIKE IT BECAUSE YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THIS PASSAGE & THIS PERSON ARE SO INGRAINED WITHIN YOU.

AND ISN'T THAT TRUE OF THE WAY WE DRAW CONCLUSIONS ABOUT THE PEOPLE AROUND US?

WE HEAR SOMETHING ABOUT A PARTICULAR PERSON OR A GROUP OF PEOPLE THOSE ATTITUDES BECOME SO DEEPLY ENTRENCHED WITHIN US THAT WE CAN'T GET BEYOND THEM.

I'M GOING TO GO OUT ON A LIMB & SUGGEST THAT IT'S ENTIRELY POSSIBLE THAT ZACCHAEUS MAY HAVE BEEN AN HONORABLE MAN EVEN *BEFORE* HE MET JESUS.

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THE NAME ZACCHAEUS MEANS?

IT MEANS PURE, HOLY, RIGHTEOUS.

MAYBE HE REALLY WAS & MAYBE THAT'S WHY JESUS CHOSE TO DINE WITH HIM THAT DAY.

MAYBE JESUS WANTED OTHERS TO SEE ZACCHAEUS AS *HE* SAW HIM.

MAYBE HE WANTED TO BREAK DOWN THE STEREOTYPES.

MAYBE HE WANTED PEOPLE TO SEE THE FOLLY OF THEIR PREJUDICES.

I'M GOING TO GO OUT ON A LIMB & SUGGEST THAT THE LESSON FOR US IN THIS PASSAGE MAY NOT BE THAT A MAN LIKE ZACCHAEUS CAN BE CHANGED, BUT THAT WE – IN OUR JUDGMENT OF THE ZACCHAEUSES IN OUR OWN LIVES - CAN BE CHANGED. AMEN.

*The Reverend Dr. Dennis R. Davenport
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
Evansville, Indiana*