All Saints’ Church Proper 26

October 30, 2016 Year C

Isaiah 1:10-18 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4; 11-12

Psalm 32:1-8 Luke 19:1-10

Dear Lord, may we run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises. Amen.

Last week I was at a steering committee meeting at the diocese for the Commission on Dignity, when one of the committee members said, “if you want to go fast, you go alone; if you want to go far, you go with others.”

Zacchaeus has gone fast all his life. A mover and a shaker, Zacchaeus has designed his life so that he can pursue his own interests at others’ expense. I think that’s why it’s actually funny to imagine this scene that Luke describes.

Zacchaeus can’t see what is happening before him, and so he is jumping up and down to get a look at what the commotion is all about. I imagine him with a bad haircut, (no wife!) He is short, stocky, unattractive, dressed in beautiful robes that are all too big for him. He is short in stature, but more importantly he comes up short in life- he is THE CHIEF TAX COLLECTOR of the very rich town of Jericho, which makes him one of the most despicable members of his community.

In his position as CHIEF TAX COLLECTOR, he BOUGHT the right to collect taxes for Caesar which gives him the power and the authority to hire other tax collectors, his minions, to do the collecting, who are not scrupulous in their methods and collect far more than what is due. No matter about the immorality. It’s all about money, and getting it as fast as you can while the getting is good.

And while “his employees” are out collecting, Zacchaeus spends his days in daily and supportive contact with the foreign oppressor, yucking it up with the enemy. Zacchaeus is living off the backs of his relatives, his neighbors, the members of his synagogue, the merchants, the widows, and the poor to take care of his pathetic, rich, justified self.

So imagine, Jesus is coming to town. His reputation proceeds him. There is so much excitement. Who is this person? Everyone is gathering to see the healer, the miracle worker, this man of God, walk into town. And as they line up in the streets, they see Zacchaeus trying to squeeze in between them to get a good “seat”, because Zacchaeus always thinks he should have the best view since the world is designed to meet his needs- of course.

And I imagine, everyone linking arms to keep Zacchaeus from seeing, from coming near to Jesus. And they’re laughing about the cleverness of their human blockade. Keeping smarmy Zacchaeus from enjoying the fun. Wouldn’t you be lining up right with them, relishing in the feelings of revenge and righteousness. Why should this creep get a chance at seeing Jesus?

Of course Zacchaeus will outsmart them all because he always does. He sees the sycamore tree in the distance and runs toward it…. I actually envision him waddling… his knees hurt, his back is out of joint, maybe he’s a little hung over, headachy, out of sorts, and he knows he’s making a bit of a fool of himself, but winning and being quicker and faster and more manipulative than everyone else is his modus operandi. He will show them.

As he takes off his elegant, dainty shoes to actually climb the tree, he has no idea what is really moving in him, swirling through his veins. The gift of faith and trust that is embedded deep within the very fiber of his soul, of his life, of his longing…. is acting, is drawing him out, is pulling him toward true sight. He is starving for healing, so isolated, so hungry, so corrupt, he can barely breathe anymore, as he breathlessly climbs the tree. He is being carried away by the divinely inspired desire to be connected and to be loved and to love. Yet, he has no idea… as they say, “he’s clueless.”

And then it happens. Jesus sees him…..sees all of him, just as he is. And he says, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I MUST stay at your house today.”

No one has ever spoken words of welcome to this man. “Oh my Lord, my home? You are coming to my home to stay with me?” No one has ever wanted to freely share company with Zacchaeus. He hurries down, and as he meets Jesus face to face, I imagine Zacchaeus beginning to cry, maybe one of the first true feelings he has ever had. He is overwhelmed by the call from Jesus to simply belong. His crooked beliefs and his life as an empty suit do not matter to Jesus, who is speaking directly to his beauty as a child of God.

Zacchaeus doesn’t have words for what is happening to him…. that the Holy Spirit is interceding, with groanings too deep for words.

We call it grace, that undeserved, merciful favor of God, immediate, direct- an unmitigated gift of blessings abounding in goodness and truth. It comes without any warning. You see a stunning sunrise or hear a beautiful chant and you want to drop to your knees; you see your children playing in the yard and their laughter gives you a joy you haven’t felt for a long time; you walk into an AA meeting and are greeted with love and you feel worthy; you wake up one morning to know that you are forgiven. Nothing was orchestrated by you- it all came as a gift. And it runs deep; time is stilled; the present moment looms large. You want to hold onto this feeling forever. You know that these moments are life giving, even salvific.

With his tears, Zacchaeus sheds his tribulations, his pettiness, his angst, his guilt, his anxiety, his mean-spiritedness, his greed, his lack of empathy, his emptiness, and he is standing before Jesus as a new man. Grace abounds. And Grace speaks:

“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.”

For the first time, Zacchaeus realizes that ***belonging*** is what matters. The richness of his purse has only produced a lonely and isolated man who is alienated from everything, living a frivolous life. He is overcome with desire to love and be loved. He has been saved because Jesus sought him out, the lost sheep, just as Jesus always does, embracing all who have been pushed away- the lepers, the ritually unclean, the sick, the poor….. and the sinners. They are all sons and daughters of Abraham. And so are we.

Jesus is always ready to dine at our table. He is here with us at our meal, as host, literally, as I hold up the Host for us to share in the breaking of the bread and in the drinking of the cup. He is here also as our guest, in our home, as we pull up our chairs to sit with him and his healing touch becomes a salve, absorbing all the ways that we can be broken like Zacchaeus. Jesus flings our fears and frustrations and failings into the wind.

“Come down out of that tree Zacchaeus and join in on the delight of belonging. I must dine with you, today.”

This is what I love about church. We are all in this together. We belong to the earth. We belong to each other. We belong to God. We come together in this holy Trinity of Life to give thanks for that precious gift of faith and hope, in the way we greet each other, in our singing, in our giving of alms, and in our praying, and in the sharing of Jesus’ meal for us.

We don’t want to travel alone; speed is of no consequence. We want to go far, to go deep, together, to enter into the very breath and bread of God’s indwelling presence so that we may become signs to our world of God’s love, the echo of primal intimacy, a love which includes everyone and brings barriers down, where we can become each other’s grounding, and come home to the hearth of our one and only true dwelling place- that place where God calls us to come down out of our trees and to take delight in belonging.

AMEN.