

“Come Down”

Luke 19:1-10

The Rev. Michele Ward

November 3, 2019

Brown Memorial Park Avenue Presbyterian Church

Last week, Andrew and I finished a sermon series on environmental stewardship and our responsibility to participate in creating the world as it should be. Today we start our month long journey through the lectionary and focus on the stewardship of our church community and our lives. To assist us with this month of reflection, a three-week adult education series will use the book *Beyond the Offering Plate: A Holistic Approach to Stewardship* to challenge the assumption that stewardship is only about financial responsibility. According to Adam Copeland, the editor of *Beyond the Offering Plate*, stewardship is “a lived theology founded on the claim that all resources begin with and belong to God.”<sup>1</sup> To be a steward, according to the Old English form of the word, means to be “an official keeper of a house or part of a house.”<sup>2</sup> This definition of steward emphasizes the theme, ‘stewarding your life,’ because we are talking about keeping our houses in order. And I don’t mean keeping the floors clean and putting away the dishes. I mean our entire house. The house of our body, the house of our time, the house of our bank account, the house of our privilege -- if I may say -- even the way we steward this very house--the house of the Lord, the one that God has given us as a gift.

Understanding stewardship this way goes beyond understandings of fundraising as the main goal. Because if we truly think about it, the resources we have do not belong to us in the first place. It may seem like they do, we could argue. We are the ones earning that money, correct? We are the ones receiving those checks and depositing them in our bank accounts. So wouldn’t it seem like that money belongs to us? Zaccheus would say that it doesn’t belong to us, and he was surrounded by wealth.

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<sup>1</sup> *Beyond the Offering Plate*, xiv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, xv.

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As Andrew pointed out last Sunday, tax collectors were reviled members of the community. The spiritual exercise here is to practice the “come down” method of stewardship. You see, Zaccheus seems to have not a care about the risks it would take to encounter Jesus. He was willing to push through a crowd, to elbow his way through it, put up with their grumbling, their whining. The people in the crowd are so thick that Zaccheus cannot see through them or get to the front in order to see Jesus. As a fellow short person, I have great empathy for Zaccheus. I know what it is like to be at a concert and then have the dreaded Tall Guy with a Hat stand in front of me, completely blocking my view. Zaccheus will go to any length--or rather any height--to see Jesus in the flesh. So, up he goes into the sycamore tree. I imagine that he is not the only person in a tree along the road trying to get a glimpse of Jesus. Zaccheus is not the only one straining to see Jesus. In the midst of the sounds of the crowd, Jesus is trying to make it through the clamor for his attention, for his healing power, for his touch. Zaccheus was a wealthy man with enough financial power to have almost whatever he wanted. And yet, the one thing--the one part of his life that was missing--was Jesus. He felt something inside of him--a longing, an ache, an emptiness--that compelled him up that tree. He climbed that tree and found his freedom in the form of Jesus calling his name.

Jesus, in the midst of the crush of people demanding his time and attention, calls out to Zaccheus words of welcome: “Zaccheus, hurry up and come down!” Zaccheus climbs down that tree, and encounters Jesus. The crowd, the same crowd of people that was so thick that Zaccheus couldn’t see, the same crowd of people that did not want to give Zaccheus a spot in the front because they know who he is and what he does. Does any of that matter to Jesus? Yes,

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in a way. But in others, not at all. In fact, it is the reality that Zaccheus, a tax collector with a large amount of privilege and power in the empire, climbs a tree in order to meet Jesus. It is the reality that Zaccheus knows that he isn't enough, that he can't do enough or be enough on his own. That longing, that ache, that emptiness--none of his status or financial success will do anything to satisfy him. But now, he has met someone who can. He has met Jesus, the only one who says with confidence, “Zaccheus, I'm staying at your house tonight!” The crowd grumbles, and Zaccheus declares, “I'm giving half of my belongings to those in need and returning fourfold what I have taken from others.” Jesus offers redemption to Zaccheus at this moment, but not only for him. That redemption is for his entire household.

The story of Zaccheus reminds me of the community organizing concept, “there are no permanent enemies. Only permanent interests.” I know that sounds a bit cut and dry, but hear me out for a minute. What is the self-interest of Zaccheus? He wants to meet Jesus. He will do anything he can to make that happen, including his climb up that tree. What about the crowd? Their self-interest seems to be the same as Zaccheus, right? The crowd as well as Zaccheus want the same thing - they want to experience Jesus and will do whatever it takes to make that happen. And Jesus - his self-interest is a little harder to pin down, but it seems to be in offering forgiveness. Jesus isn't interested in judging Zaccheus or condemning him. Jesus is interested in turning the self-righteous crowd's ideas about welcome and reconciliation on their heads.

When Jesus thinks about stewarding his house, he thinks about welcome. He thinks about staying with one of the most reviled people in Jericho. He thinks about challenging the

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self-righteous crowd to live a better way. He thinks about telling us to hurry and come down from our trees. He thinks about

No one in this story is the permanent enemy. The crowd and Zaccheus both get it wrong here. Jesus sees that, and also sees the opportunity for movement, for transformation, for the world as it should be to come to life. And so he says the most unusual words: “I am staying at your house tonight!”

What would you do if Jesus said he was coming over to your house tonight? I know I would want to clean my bathroom a little better than usual. Zaccheus doesn't say any of that. Instead, he makes an even bigger promise. That welcome and hospitality that Jesus showed him that moment he will now turn and share with the crowd. The very same crowd that pushed him away and wouldn't let him see Jesus. The very same crowd that he had abused and misused as a tax collector for the Roman government. He is seeking reconciliation with them, and will not allow their judgment and hatred towards him color the way that he reacts to them. The outpouring of love that Jesus gives him changes him.

So, where are you hiding? Where you are straining for a glimpse of Jesus in your life? Are you in that crowd, judging others being less holy than you are? Are you Zaccheus in that tree, feeling that empty feeling and knowing there is something more to life than the world around you promised? Are you Jesus offering welcome to someone that others ignore or despise? Jesus is coming to your today. He has told you to climb down that tree and will not pass you by on the road. Zaccheus knows that love and share it in abundance, knowing that none of that money belonged to him in the first time. Do you hear Jesus calling your name? Come down. Come down out of that tree, and live.