

November 4, 2007

Communion

Holy Baptism

Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4

Luke 19:1-10

“A Vision Becomes Reality”

So what is Zacchaeus doing up in a tree? This is just not his style, you know. He is a tax collector for the Roman Empire, after all, and not just any tax collector. He is a chief tax collector, one who has a collection of subordinate tax collectors who are beholden to his authority.

We get an important clue as to the role of tax collectors in the days of Jesus earlier in Luke's gospel. Way back in chapter 3, John the Baptizer is preaching about wrath and repentance. We are told that many people came to him, and were startled by his words. They asked him, “What then should we do?” His response was “Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise.” Then there is a telling detail. Luke goes on to write, “Even tax collectors came to be baptized, and they asked him, ‘Teacher, what should we do?’”

Even tax collectors. Apparently they were seen to be sinners in the extreme! And why not? They were local people who had sold out to Rome, to the occupying government. Instead of resisting the Romans, or staying separate from the Romans, they went to work for the Romans, and profited off of the suffering of their neighbors and relatives. Not only did they collect taxes for Rome, but their working agreement with the Romans allowed them to add their own unspecified collection fees to the taxes. In other words, they could force people to pay them whatever fee they set, and they could get Roman soldiers to bully people for payment whenever there was a problem collecting these taxes plus collection fees. There was no ceiling or upper limit of any kind for a tax collector's fee. Thus, they could become filthy rich, just because they were willing to turn their backs on their own people and do this dirty work on behalf of the Romans.

Tax collectors in the days of Jesus were about as popular then as drug lords are today. They were seen as thugs who were not above extortion and violence to get whatever they wanted out of people. They were seen as profiteers and pirates, caring nothing for the suffering of others, and only for themselves. So when they asked John the Baptizer what they needed to do to give authentic repentance to God, when they asked the question, “Teacher, what should we do?” John's response was, “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you.” Very few tax collectors avoided the corruption of collecting far more for themselves. The detail that Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector should tell us that he is very, very rich, and no doubt very, very corrupt.

So how did this drug lord type of personality, this mobster, come to be sprawled across the limbs of a tree in the middle of town? This is not a very dignifying place for an adult to be, draped among the leaves of a tree for everyone to see. Unless he would

resort to such humiliation, he will not see this Jesus who is coming through town. Apparently he wants very, very much to see Jesus, just to catch sight of him.

We can't know exactly why Zacchaeus felt such a deep need to see Jesus. Luke does not share those details with us, so we can only guess. I suppose that for someone like a chief tax collector in the Roman Empire, someone like Jesus would be quite a curiosity. What does someone like Jesus look like, someone who has no need to use manipulation or coercion or force to be seen as powerful? What does a person look like, when she or he operates on personal integrity alone? What kind of person is willing to give up money and security and hometown in order to touch as many other human beings as possible with grace, challenge, and encouragement? And what kind of person is willing to stand up to the present authorities and challenge their ways and risk their wrath? Why wouldn't a person prefer to join with those authorities, even in their corruption, and profit from them? Why would someone like Jesus choose to unveil their misuse of power and hold them accountable to a higher power? What does this Jesus look like, anyway? Zacchaeus knew that someone like Jesus wouldn't give the likes of a tax collector the time of day, so his only chance to see this unusual person would be to watch him from a remote location.

Zacchaeus must have been quite a sight up in that tree. No wonder Jesus stopped and looked up at him. Just who was this little man with all the gold jewelry, dangling comically in a tree? Who would go to such lengths just to catch a glimpse of him? Aha, the crowd murmurs. It is a tax collector. I have to think that Jesus must have had to restrain a smile. What is a tax collector doing up in the branches of a tree trying to see me? This is not your everyday tax collector!

“Zacchaeus, come down out of that tree! I'm coming to your house for dinner!”

A shock wave passes through the crowd as Jesus says these words. The murmuring swells in animation. “Zacchaeus? That guy who threatened to break my kneecaps if I didn't sell my son into slavery to pay my debts to him!” “Zacchaeus? Hey, I thought this Jesus was supposed to be holy. And here he goes off to eat with a rip off artist and a crook!” “Oh, isn't that the way it goes? This Jesus is just after the people with all the money after all! He'll probably brownnose Zacchaeus and get a big fat check out of him so he can go down the road in style!” “Peter! Peter! What is our teacher Jesus doing? We can't go into the home of a tax collector! Maybe we can just wait outside the gate while Jesus eats a meal with him. How are we going to manage the damage control from this? The Romans will love it, but the Pharisees! Oh, the Pharisees will totally write us off. They'll have us all crucified!”

Rather than accepting the hospitality of the local leaders of the synagogue, or of some other worthy family of Jericho, Jesus goes to the home of Zacchaeus. You see, the qualification to be embraced by Jesus is not that one be good, or have their act together, or be well thought of by the community. The one qualification to be found by Jesus is to be lost. Everyone can be embraced by Jesus by that definition. Everyone.

But this grace from Jesus is not cheap. Jesus may come to each and every one of us as we are, but we are not left just as we are. Zacchaeus is not the same person after Jesus leaves his home. Not at all. He is finally free from the system of corruption that surrounded him. He chooses to become generous and to make amends for any of the wrongs he has committed. He comes out of his home after dinner to wave goodbye and to see Jesus off as Jesus continues toward a cross in Jerusalem. And he comes out as a totally different person. He comes out without his hardness and greed. He comes out with an open hand instead of a fist, with a giving heart instead of a seizing snarl.

So what does the action of Jesus in today's lesson signify? It is this. That even in the middle of a crowd praising him and shouting their support at him, Jesus does not just go along with the base prejudices of the crowd. Jesus is not just a crowd pleaser. Instead, he confounds the crowd. He does not want the praise of the crowd. He wants commitment. And so because Jesus is willing to reach out to one shoved to the outside of the crowd, even one who is worthy of being despised, a horrible social blight of a person is allowed to flourish, to be given another chance, to be given a new beginning. And because of this, someone such as Zacchaeus can become a person of generosity. Habukkuk has told of a vision of a time when the proud would reckon with a spirit within them that is not right, and that they would come to live by their faith rather than any other power. So when Jesus declares, "Today salvation has come to this house," Jesus affirms that this vision that is held by so many prophets has come to be reality, at least in the house of Zacchaeus. This is a day when righteousness will rule above all other powers, a day when riches will be understood not as an end in themselves, but as a tool to do far greater things.

Elizabeth Cosnett has written words to a hymn titled, "When Love Is Stamped on Every Coin." It seems to embody what Zacchaeus come to understand. She writes:

*When love is stamped on every coin
the market with the cross shall meet,
while bulls and bears with angels join
to dance along Threadneedle Street.*

*But cash has meaning here and now:
it measures work and time and care;
it buys a bomb; it buys a plough;
it pays for hope; it funds despair.*

*Remind us always, dearest Lord,
of what you said in Galilee:
that where we keep our treasure stored
our hearts and minds will surely be.*

*So shall our dealings speak your word,
your values keep our souls alive,
while dreams that well may be absurd*

assist Creation to survive.

(Elizabeth Cosnett, Hymns for Everyday Saints. London: Stainer & Bell Ltd., 2001)

Amen.