

EVERYDAY HEROES: THAT LITTLE BIG MAN

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The Rev. Dr. Howard Chapman
First Presbyterian Church of Marion, Iowa
Text: Luke 19:1-10

SCRIPTURE

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "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." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

The Word of the Lord **Thanks be to God!**

SERMON

We are continuing our sermon series on Every Day Heroes of the Bible. So far we have talked about Jethro, Rahab, Deborah, and last week we looked at Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter. Today we will be looking at a little big man by the name of Zacchaeus. But it has been another one of those weeks, hasn't it? It almost seems like every week is one of those weeks, but once again innocent people have been killed, some by being run over by a deranged man driving a Home Depot truck, while others were gunned down in a checkout line at Walmart. After one of those weeks, it would be nice to hear some good news, wouldn't it? So I will get into the story of Zacchaeus in just a minute but first I would like to share a good news story and tell you about some everyday heroes that I recently heard about.

They are a married couple by the name of Kathy Fletcher and David Simpson who live in Washington DC. They have a son named Santi who attended a public high school. Santi had a friend who sometimes came to school hungry, so Santi invited him home to dinner on a regular basis and sometimes to sleep over. That friend had a friend and that friend had a friend and all were welcome at Kathy and David's dinner table.

Over time they developed something they just called Thursday Night Dinners or TND. It has become a regular event where 20 to 30 teenagers might show up on a Thursday night to have dinner with Kathy and David. Most of them have had a tough home life and have faced everything from homelessness to hunger to physical and sexual abuse. But on Thursday nights, they have a family.

They call Kathy and David "Momma" and "Dad" and are polite and helpful with everything from meal preparation to clean up to sitting around afterwards, talking and sometimes singing or even reciting poetry. Cell phones are put away. "Be in the now," Kathy insists. Holidays are celebrated. Birthdays are celebrated, sometimes for a teenager who has never blown out the candles on a birthday cake.

As Thursday Night Dinner developed and Kathy and David got to know these kids, things expanded. Sometimes these kids have been kicked out of their homes, so they crash in the basement. Sometimes they need something specific, a bike to get to a job, a laptop to do their homework, help in filling out an application, or just someone to listen. Sometimes they need a lot more. Whatever it is Kathy and David try to help. They contact their own friends. They check with various community resources. They do whatever they can to help these kids, and so they have created a charitable organization called AOK, which stands for All Our Kids. This year four of those kids from troubled backgrounds are in college and others are working or volunteering or getting various kinds of vocational training.

Bill Milliken, a youth activist, who once ran a nationwide organization focused on keeping teenagers from dropping out of school has said, “I still have yet to see one program change one kid’s life. Programs don’t change people. What changes people is relationships.” That is what Kathy and David are doing, establishing deep, abiding relationships over plates of baked chicken and tossed salad.

Now, I could find nothing about Kathy and David’s faith background. They do not appear to be doing all this for any religious reasons. But what they are doing sure sounds like God’s beloved community to me. And if you ask Kathy how she ended up with so many kids flowing through her home, she will reply, “Knowing how many kids are out there struggling, how is it possible that you don’t?”¹

Isn’t that a great story? After a week like this it is nice to hear some good news about everyday heroes, and to be reminded that there are a lot of them out there. Our story for this morning is about a relationship that changes someone. It is a story that is familiar to many of us. This is now the sixth time I have preached on this text here in this church. I always like to point out the humor of the story. The gospel writer, Luke, tells us that in Jericho there was a rich, chief tax collector. In other words, he was a big man in the local political/economic system, but you might remember me saying the humor is in the name Zacchaeus. Luke’s first readers would have snickered at that line because of course the assumption would be that Zacchaeus was rich by cheating and exploiting others. Yet the name “Zacchaeus” means pure or transparent and therefore, by implication, honest. A rich chief tax collector was named Honesty. This would be like someone seven feet tall being called Shorty or a nudist with the name Modesty.

But the story continues with a comic flare because Luke points out that while Zacchaeus was a big chief tax collector, he was a wee little man, as it says in the Sunday School song. Nevertheless, he wants to see Jesus so Zacchaeus runs on ahead of the crowd and climbs a sycamore tree. He runs, he does not walk. This all takes place in the ancient city of Jericho, located down by the Dead Sea, which is some 800 feet below sea level. The climate is something like Death Valley out in California, with temperatures often in the triple digits. Can you imagine someone rich, like Bill Gates or Warren Buffet, running down the road when it is 103 in the shade? Then as now, rich people don’t run no matter what the temperature. As a rule, rich people like to preserve their dignity. They don’t want to look silly. If they need something in a hurry they send a servant.

Zacchaeus running up the street would be ridiculous enough, but then he climbs a tree. Remember he was not wearing pants. He wore a loose flowing caftan or tunic. Ladies, when you were a little girl, what were you told about climbing a tree or climbing up on the playground equipment if you were wearing a skirt or dress? Well, I think you get the picture.

It is quite a picture of this despised rich tax collector, probably sweating and breathing hard, up a sycamore tree, hoping to get a glimpse of this itinerant preacher from Galilee named Jesus. Luke intends for us to chuckle a bit, because in an instant everything becomes all switched around. Just when Zacchaeus was pleased with himself for getting such a good spot to see all that was happening; just when he was celebrating the view, Jesus stops, and looks up, right into his eyes. All of a sudden the spectator becomes the spectacle. Zacchaeus must have been stunned, but as he looked at Jesus, he could tell that Jesus knew exactly who and what he was. As that was sinking in, what Jesus said was even more amazing. “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” It was not a question. It was an emphatic statement. I must stay at your house. Zacchaeus had no choice in the matter. Jesus was coming to his house.

Now the crowd might have been smirking at the sight of this hated tax collector perched up in a tree, but they were not happy about the way things were turning out. Zacchaeus was thrilled to welcome Jesus into his home, but the good citizens of Jericho were not amused. The text says “All who saw it began to grumble and said, ‘He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.’” It is not so funny when Jesus snubs the nice and decent folk of the town to actually go and spend quality time with a scumbag like Zacchaeus.

¹ This story of Kathy Fletcher and David Simpson comes from a column by David Brooks entitled “The Power of a Dinner Table,” published in *The New York Times*, October, 18 2016.

As with a lot of stories in the Bible, you get the feeling there is something more going on here; like we don't quite have the whole picture. I think an important clue is what Zacchaeus says in response to this criticism. Our text puts it this way, "Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, '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.'"

But there is a problem with this translation because in the original Greek, the verb tense is present not future. Zacchaeus does not say "I will give half of my possessions to the poor and I will pay back four times." He says "I am giving and I am paying." Now you might be wondering so what? What difference does it make if it is future or present text? Well, I think it helps explain why he was so anxious to see Jesus. I think something was going on with Zacchaeus long before Jesus came to town. I think perhaps this is not so much a story of repentance, but a story of connecting and finally being in the right relationship.

Although he was rich, and for many years had been working the system, I suspect that for some time Zacchaeus had realized he was being chewed up by that system. He did not like what was happening and wanted to change. Furthermore, in the 3rd chapter of his gospel, Luke tells us that tax collectors came to the Jordan to be baptized by John. And John does not tell them to stop being tax collectors. He just tells them not to collect more taxes than they have been ordered to collect. I don't have any proof, but what if one of these tax collectors was a little guy from Jericho, a town just a few miles downriver from where John was baptizing? It is possible. But however it happened, I believe Zacchaeus realized what he had gained financially did not make up for all he had lost. His profession had cut him off from his friends and neighbors. Any sense of self-respect or personal integrity had long gone. He knew what people thought of him and it tore him up inside. So he was trying to turn things around and make it right. He was indeed giving to the poor and trying to make up for his past dishonesty as best he could.

Zacchaeus was making progress, heading in the right direction, but he must have felt very isolated and alone. Then he heard that Jesus was coming to town, a man who was connected to God in a way unlike anyone else, even the Baptizer. Maybe if he could see Jesus he would figure out what he needed to do. Maybe that would be the difference. Zacchaeus just had to find out. So that is why he scrambled up that tree, not caring what anyone thought or how ridiculous he looked. He was determined to see Jesus.

It was all worth it. Jesus comes to his house and it is something like a Thursday Night Dinner at Kathy and David's, for around the table Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." Jesus makes a point of saying that Zacchaeus is a descendent of Abraham, that the connection has been made and the relationship has been restored. Zacchaeus is not alone. He does indeed belong in God's Beloved Community, and salvation, health and wholeness has come to him, but not just to him, to his house, his entire family as well.

It is that time of the year when we look at budgets, at income and expenses, and try to make some plans for 2018. Next week, we are hoping you will bring your pledge cards so that we can firm up these plans. Now it would be tempting to make a big deal out of what Zacchaeus was offering financially. How about fifty percent, rather than a tithe, ten percent? That was what good old Zach was doing. But that misses the point, entirely. The important thing was not the amount he gave. What was important was that he had been with Jesus. He had encountered the Holy. He had experienced something we call grace, amazing, loving, irresistible grace. He had been drawn into the community and was no longer alone. Salvation had come to his house. He had escaped the system that was chewing him up.

Today many are caught in the same system that isolates them and chews them up. Loneliness is a huge problem in our society. In the '70s, something like 8% of Americans lived alone. Today it is close to 30%. Suicides have gone up dramatically since 1999. So in spite of cell phones and internet and social media, we are becoming more and more cut off from each other. And the system tells us that the solution to this isolation is to buy, buy, buy more stuff. We are not human beings who love and connect and belong. We are consumers. Our value is only in what we can spend. The system tells us to spend as much as we can, spend even more than we can afford. That is what matters. And it cuts us off from each other and grinds us down and wears us out. True stewardship is about fighting against this system. It is not about budgets or balance sheets. It is not about salaries or heating bills. It is not about doing your duty or paying your fair share. It is about grace. It is about stating boldly, "I am not alone. I belong to God and the Beloved Community and not to the system."

Stewardship is about joy. It is about coming to the realization that our true value is not in what we spend. Our value is in how we are connected. Together, in right relationship with God and with one another, God is able to bless all that we offer, increasing our efforts and empowering us to do more than we can imagine.

So yes, we do want you to increase your pledge for next year, and indicate that on your card when you bring it next week. We want you to be generous because you belong to God and not to the system. And you are not alone. You are a part of us, the First Presbyterian Church of Marion. Together, with God's help, we can do so much more than we can on our own.

You see, First Presbyterian Church is not some kind of program. That is not what brings you here today. After a week like this, we don't need another program. It was not a program that transformed Zacchaeus and brought wholeness into his life. What we all need is the relationships we have with God and with one another. Jesus wanted to spend some time with Zacchaeus and strengthen that relationship. Jesus wants to spend some time with you, right now, right here. When we come to this table it is one more way to be connected and to escape the system that is chewing us up. It doesn't make us any richer or produce anything that can be bought or sold. But Jesus invites us to come down and experience his love and goodness. He reminds us of what is eternal and what is temporary. Jesus offers us all that we need to be made whole. He offers his very self. It does not cost us a cent, but it is worth more than all the money in all the banks on this planet. For Jesus comes to seek and save the lost.

I hope you join us next week as we hear the story of another Every Day Hero, an encourager named Barnabas. Oh, and don't forget your pledge card. May salvation truly come to our house, in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.