

November 3 2013

Scripture Lessons ~ Ephesians 1:15-23

Luke 19:1-10

Sermon *Seeing Who Jesus Is*

When my boys were pretty small we used to take them a lot of places that they may or may not remember too well as they have gotten older. And they still have mixed feelings about them; historical museums, battle fields, old mansions, presidential libraries, state of natural and state parks, gardens, concerts, recitals and art galleries. The art galleries were of particular interest for Shane, the older boy, since he was interested in art from almost the beginning of life. Especially, when he was four or five years old he took quite an interest in it.

Well we often wondered whether we were pushing the envelope because we started these trips when he was so young but an interesting experience sort of settled my conscious about whether I did the right thing or not at the time. Once when I think the younger one, Andrew, was four and the Shane was five, we spent all week in the Washington DC area. We stayed in a sort of suite almost apartment like layout in Alexandria, Virginia and we took the underground into the city every day to do something different.

One day we decided to sort of split up divide and conquer and I took Shane to the National Gallery and Andrew and Mom went to the Air and Space Museum which suited Andrew just fine. And Shane was just enthralled and I was shocked as he had never seen so much art work, all in one place in all his life; and I was shocked that at five it truly kept his interest for almost a couple of hours. As we were walking through the gallery Renaissance area we saw the famous painting by Raphael of Mary and Jesus and John the Baptist in which the two boys were babies and it was absolutely beautiful if you have ever seen pictures of it. Vivid colors, lovely sweet faces and wonderful perspective and Shane were entranced. He must have spent half an hour just looking at it and asking questions about it before I finally pulled him away from it to see some of the other things. Later on when I told him we could go back and do whatever we wanted to do before we had to go and meet the rest of the family. Do you know what he chose? He chose to revisit that 500 year old painting of the Virgin and Child with John the Baptist by Raphael. It was almost as if in his intense focus on that one work of art, he was peering into the very heart and the very soul of the artist Raphael almost as if he who he was and to see what made Raphael tick in a sense.

Strangely Luke's Gospel lesson for this morning speaks the same way about of the tax collector Zacchaeus. Luke says he was trying to see who Jesus was. Trying to see who Jesus was. Luke says this is all because Zacchaeus was short in stature. He says he was not physically tall enough to get up and see over the crowd as Jesus passed by. I am sure that it's physically true but I would like to suggest that there is more to trying to see who Jesus is for Zacchaeus and also for us as modern day Christians and in many ways we are too short stature as we take on this task as followers of the way of Jesus Christ.

Now Zacchaeus as is pointed out by Luke is no ordinary tax collector but a chief tax collector. In addition he was just doing well for himself he was as the text tells us, he was very rich. Hopefully you will recall from last week's sermon that tax collectors in Israel in Jesus' day were the lowest of the low in society. Not only were they fellow Jews traitors and collaborators but with their hated Roman rulers but likely he was corrupt with the right to skim extra money from people's taxes. He was rich then because in essence he also stole money from his fellow Jewish citizens. He was a pretty reprehensible character. Someone, no human in their right mind would want to spend any time with whatsoever. Certainly not someone who would give a rip as who Jesus of Nazareth was as he passed by and yet even with his short comings; I am convinced with his shortness maybe in fact be a symbol of his stature in the story, Zacchaeus is curious about Jesus for some reason.

Maybe he had heard stories about Jesus. Maybe he had met people who had experienced his miracles and his teachings or maybe he had just heard the hype of that day. Whatever the case might be, Zacchaeus climbed up in that sycamore tree to see who Jesus was. But I think more than to just see Jesus visually as I mentioned with the children this morning I think the words, to see who Jesus was, implied was by an extra step of faith on our part. I think Zacchaeus had come to a cross road in his life this is just my take on the story, having reflected on the hurt that he had done others and what he knew or what he had heard about Jesus and he decided to find out who in the world that this person was.

Zacchaeus wanted to seek out one who could show him something of the very nature of God's love and God's mercy and how he could pull himself up out of the hole of hurt and wrong that he had dug for himself as a tax collector in life. In short I think Zacchaeus wanted to change his life and change it for the better. And so as usual something in Jesus, recognized Zacchaeus' sincerity and further desire to become a better person and much to the chagrin of his fellow Jews, Jesus invited, of all things, himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' house, something no other Jew would have done, as the kids would consider literally to be an unclean person.

And what was the result Zacchaeus not only changed he became an entirely new person not only did he turn from his corrupt practices, he went the second mile and even the third mile making good on any corrupt tax collections fourfold

the Scriptures tell us and even giving a full half of his assets to the poor in the process. For Zacchaeus was not just a new man and not just a changed man, he was a happier man, He was a grateful man. He was a grateful man to God for his love and his forgiveness shown to Zacchaeus through Jesus Christ.

Well the same question appears as it usually does in my sermons what the about us? What does the story of Zacchaeus calls us to do? What does the story tell us as modern day Christians to do? Well as usual it reminds us again, again, and again in Scripture, God often picks regular men, run of the mill and even flawed people many of whom are not unlike you and me to do God's work in the world. That makes me feel better when I hear that but more than that we are reminded that God is calling each of us imperfect and unprepared though we may be to play significant roles in God's kingdom.

I think that God does perhaps so that those who recognize their own weakness can actually be used by God because they may not have the same arrogance, maybe not the same pride that others do. And we may in fact be grateful enough to be called by God into the kingdom. More often or not I think, God chooses the lowly and imperfect to just rock the boat a little bit; to kind of stir the pot a little bit, to turn the tables and to remind each one of us, God is in charge of this world and will choose whoever God's chooses to do God's work.

That said I think the perhaps, the unique lesson of this story if we truly want to know God. If we truly want to know Jesus and the Holy Spirit, if we truly want to follow Jesus on the journey of faith and learn who we are; and what we should be doing with our lives by light of God's teachings and will, we have to take a very important step. If we like Zacchaeus seek who, who Jesus is. We have to look into the very heart; the very soul of God through Jesus to see who and what we will find on that journey and unfortunately it is not an easy task. It takes time. It takes sensitivity and it takes quiet and it takes prayer and it takes being around those people and in those places where God is fervently looked for and understood day by day.

I hope you and I are that kind of people as we gather together week after week. People who seek to see who God is but even more importantly I hope on this All Saints Sunday that our beloved Newport United Church of Christ continue to be that kind of fertile field, where that kind of church can take place.

Together we say AMEN