



SUNNYVALE

PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

728 W. Fremont Avenue • Sunnyvale, CA 94087
408.739.1892 • www.svpc.us • info@svpc.us

From the Pulpit

Sermon ~ On The Road... To Jericho: Jesus' Short List

The Rev. Dr. Steve Harrington ~ February 19, 2012

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."

Psalm 85:7-13

Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, and grant us your salvation.

Let me hear what God the Lord will speak, for he will speak peace to his people, to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.

Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him, that his glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and peace will kiss each other.

Faithfulness will spring up from the ground, and righteousness will look down from the sky.

The Lord will give what is good, and our land will yield its increase.

Righteousness will go before him, and will make a path for his steps.

So we started this series last week called *On the Road...* in which we are going to be traveling with Jesus as he makes his way from the North up around Capernaum ultimately down to Jerusalem and the cross. Last week we followed him out on the refugee road to Egypt where, while he was still an infant, his family fled to escape the murderous persecutions of a paranoid

King. The next several decades of his life are largely unknown to us except that, following Herod's death, Jesus returned with his family to Nazareth where he grew up.

What I'm hoping we can do in this series as we travel with Jesus is catch again the momentum of the gospel – be caught *up* again in the movement of God's love – as it is revealed to us in the journeys of Jesus. And here's the good news: God is on a journey through our world in Jesus Christ and he is on a road that leads him *towards*, not away from us. Anyone of us at any time might feel lost and left out; we might feel distant from God and cut off from hope; we may be all too aware of the ways in which we have turned from Jesus and walked off on our own. But none of that changes the fact that God in Christ moves *towards* us in grace and love.

Our text tells us here at the start of Luke chapter 19 that Jesus entered Jericho but was *intending* to pass through it. You know, some people plan out their travels and vacations right down to the minute with every turn and stop completely figured out. And that's not a bad thing – it's just that then the agenda is set, the itinerary fixed with little room for change or interruption. Jesus however works on a more flexible – *interruptible* – schedule in which he's always got his eye out for the person that's hurting, estranged or in need of a healing touch.

Jesus' plan – *his itinerary* – was to simply pass through Jericho on his way elsewhere. But Jesus always has his eye out for people on the down side of hope and the far side of grace: people like Zacchaeus. In fact when Jesus thinks about the kind of people he came to seek and save its folk like Zacchaeus who were on his short list.

In a few quick brush strokes Luke paints for us a picture of Zacchaeus. Luke tells us four things about him: first, he was a Jew, Zacchaeus is a Jewish name; second, he was the chief tax collector in Jericho which was a major trade city and therefore, thirdly, he was rich; and finally, Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a short man -- although today we might say he was simply vertically challenged.

Now notice that Zacchaeus is not just a tax collector; he is the *chief* tax collector. See, it was different back then with taxes. Back then people didn't like tax collectors. OK it wasn't all that different, but the *way* they collected taxes was different. The Romans would sell the tax job to the highest bidder like a franchise. And then whoever got to be chief tax collector would hire others who would go out and, with the backing of the military, get the tax. BUT! The big difference was that the tax collectors made their money by whatever they could squeeze out of people *over and beyond* the actual tax required. Jericho was a primary trade town, the winter capital for King Herod and so the chief tax collector of Jericho would be a very rich man. As the tax collector in an unjust system Zacchaeus would be hated by his neighbors; as a collaborator with the Romans he would also be seen as a traitor to his people; and as one who associated with Gentiles he would be considered religiously unclean. Zacchaeus had three strikes against him right from the start.

In fact it's safe to say that, except for his IRS buddies, Zacchaeus didn't have a lot of friends; which is why as a short person he had no success in seeing Jesus until he climbed the tree. No one was going to let him squeeze his way to the front. So he climbed the tree to be able to watch Jesus from a distance while he himself could remain unobserved.

There's something more going on here than simply Zacchaeus trying to get a box seat. Zacchaeus was *hiding* up in that tree. But as Jesus passes under the tree he stops and looks up. Which of course makes the crowds look up and they all see the most ridiculous sight: their chief tax collector—the rich and ruthless Zacchaeus—clinging precariously to the branch of a sycamore tree. And you just know they've got to be pleased with what they *imagine* will happen next. They wait for Jesus to deliver the scathing rebuke and scolding. They are certain Jesus will tell Zacchaeus how wrong he has been - Zacchaeus *himself* probably expected it - and so Jesus' words came as a shock to them all. "Zacchaeus, come down, for I must stay at your house today!" That's it. No great theological test. No huge divine judgment -- just an invitation to come down to get to know Jesus personally. The town's people are stunned. But *their* complaint is *my* greatest hope: that Jesus is willing to be the guest of a sinner!

I don't know about you but I can see Zacchaeus in myself. I have seen how sometimes I want to remove myself and just observe God from a distance. Sometimes I see a reluctance in myself to have a genuine encounter with Jesus. Sometimes I see in myself a desire to stay up in the tree aloof and away, untouched and immune. Sometimes in the hardness of my heart and the reticence of my spirit and the reality of my life that falls short -- sometimes I imagine that I can sit up in a tree and just look down on Jesus but never have to be changed or challenged; to watch the parade without walking the path.

But Jesus isn't interested in a religion that simply looks on without being touched; that tries to observe without becoming involved. No, Jesus would stop at the foot of our tree today and say: "Come down for I must be your guest today; I want to be your friend!"

No matter how far we feel from God the gospel is absolutely true: we can never run farther than grace can reach, we can never sin more than mercy can forgive, we can never fall deeper than love can catch.

That's what the gospel is all about: God comes down in Jesus Christ and invites us, just as we are, to come and experience the grace that not only forgives but which also transforms. When Zacchaeus comes down from his place of hiding he is forever changed because suddenly in that gracious invitation Zacchaeus becomes such a new person that Jesus says, "Salvation has come to this house!"

On the road to Jericho God throws a party for someone everyone else had thrown out. Tony Campolo, a sociology professor and Baptist minister was speaking at a conference in Honolulu and, having traveled from the East Coast time zone, he found himself wide-awake at 3 AM one morning looking for a cup of coffee. He wandered into a greasy diner with no tables just a row of spinning stools at the counter. He sat there alone with his coffee and donut until a group of prostitutes came in for what he learned was a regular coffee break they took each morning at 3:30. In the midst of their conversation one of them said, "Hey, it's my birthday tomorrow!" Another said, "So what do you want me to do about it, bake you a cake?" And the first one said, "No, I just happened to remember that's all; don't worry about it, I've *never* had a birthday cake."

After the women left, Tony asked the owner about the woman who sat next to him. "Yea, that's Agnes" he said. She comes in here every night. What about her?" And Tony said, "She said it's her birthday tomorrow. What do you say we throw her a party?" The owner—his name was Harry—liked the idea and insisted on baking the cake. Tony said that he'd come early to decorate. Well, word got out about the party and by 3 a.m. that diner was packed with prostitutes from all over the city. When Agnes walked in, there were streamers all over the place and a big sign wishing her Happy Birthday. She walked in and they all shouted out and began to sing. Agnes was so shocked she didn't say anything. Somebody had to help her sit down at the counter her knees were so weak. And when the cake came out all lit up with candles Agnes began to cry. When it came time to serve the cake Agnes pleaded with them not to cut it yet. She'd never had a cake before and she turned to Tony and said, "Can I take it with me? I want to show it to my mother and she's just 2 doors down; I'll bring it right back, I promise." Then she grabbed the cake and ran out of the diner and the place was left in surprised silence. After a few awkward minutes Tony Campolo didn't know what to do or to say to all the prostitutes packed into the diner so he reverted to the minister's standard fall back plan and said, "let us pray" ... and then he offered a word of thanks for Agnes and said a prayer for healing and blessing in her life.

Tony says that after he finished praying, the owner Harry leaned over the counter and said, "Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to?" And Tony said, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for hookers at 3 o'clock in the morning." Harry looked him in the eye and said, "No you don't. There's no church like that. If there was, I'd join it. I'd join a church like that."

Don't you want to be a part of a healed and healing community? Don't you want to hear the invitation of God, not based on how well or how much you do but on how much you are loved? Don't you want to be a part of the party of God? That's the road that we get to walk when we walk with Jesus!

This is what Jesus is all about: eating with those who feel they don't belong; going to be the guest of those who least deserve it; transforming the ones that everyone else had written off; touching lives in such a way that they respond with glad and generous hearts.

In the last place you'd expect it, Grace

In the last person you'd look for it, Hope.

In the last house you'd imagine it, salvation and joy--

All because the son of man has come to seek out and to save the lost.