

First reading Frederick Buechner, *The Yellow Leaves*

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 Painful Past"

Rev. Charles Schuster

March 20, 2011

It is possible that people don't get what a preacher is trying to say. It's not the fault of the listener. The problem is in the pulpit. People say things to us and they say things about us. Michael Pearson is a preacher. I met him in Arizona a couple weeks ago. He wrote a book. The title of the book is *Letters from Maybe*. Each chapter begins with what someone said about the preacher on Sunday morning in the sermon. Each chapter begins with the words, "I didn't get much out of the last half of the sermon," followed by a comment like this. "My husband says that church starts eleven o'clock sharp and ends twelve o'clock dull. The Reverend had a good train of thought, it just takes him too long to get to the terminal. And for the first time in my life, I actually envied my feet. They were asleep. Today's sermon I would call a steer sermon. A point here and a point there, and a lot of bull in between."

Could be people say those things to each other after church here. If you leave the sanctuary and go to lunch somewhere and you do this, don't tell them where you've been. Somebody might hear you. I'm reminded of the story of Winston Churchill. Near the end of his career, he attended a meeting. Two men were talking, and they recognized Sir Winston. One of them said to the other in a whisper, "They say Churchill is quite senile now." And the other one said, "Yes, and he's doing England more harm than good." And the first one said, "He should stop, step aside, leave the running of the government to younger, more dynamic people." Churchill turned back to them. In a loud voice he said, "And they say he's gone quite deaf."

In the event that this sermon is unclear, some will not be with it when it ends, let me tell you where it's going. I'm going to say today the golden rule is not the best there is. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" is a mediocre doctrine. And today there's one better. The golden rule should be ignored because there's something better, and today, I'm going to tell you what it is. But first....

You know, nothing makes us feel small like what we do ourselves. Every one of us has a dark chapter in our life, and it's relative. Carlyle Marney once said a priest told him listening to the confessions of nuns is like being stoned to death with popcorn. It's relative. But there was a time when we did something we wish we hadn't done, or said something we wished we hadn't said. Zacchaeus had this dark chapter in his life when he saw Jesus he climbed the sycamore tree. A tax collector, he was chief of all tax collectors. He took money from his people and he gave it to the enemy and he kept some for himself. He was rich, but he was crooked, and he felt small. He climbed a sycamore tree not because, I think, he was small in stature thought that's what the text says. I don't think that was why he climbed the tree. I think he was small in spirit. A small man in a high place. Didn't want to be around people because he knew who he was and he knew they knew who he was. A dark chapter. Hostility for himself. A small person in a high place.

Interesting to note, famous people who are fallible, to watch them fall. Marion Jones ran faster than anyone else in the Olympics. She won a gold medal, but they took it from her when they realized she had been using performance-enhancing drugs. John Kennedy, for example, we could write a book. We love to talk about the famous people. Many people have written a book, haven't they. Richard Nixon resigned from the presidency because of a cover-up at Watergate. Bill Clinton almost got kicked out of the White House. I'm just not sure about politicians. Televangelists, Jimmy Swaggart, it goes on, dark chapters in their lives. Famous people, rich people, powerful people, what about us?

What about us? Yesterday there was a wedding here at the church. I've been doing weddings for over forty years. I think I've done about five hundred weddings. At the rehearsal Friday, one of the singers, a soloist, said to me, "Watching you do this rehearsal, it is obvious to me that you know what you're doing. You are so good at it." And I said rather smugly, "Yes, I am a veteran." At the wedding it all went as it was supposed to go, except for one thing. I forgot to have them say their vows to each other. They had something written out to say to each other, and I forgot. We did the rings. I pronounced them married, we were headed for the unity candle, and the bride took on a voice I had never heard from her. It wasn't a soft whisper like a lullaby to a child. And it wasn't a church tone that could lead to a prayer. It was more decisive than that. It had a deep quality like Hulk Hogan or maybe Tim Teebo waiting for the snap from center, saying to me, "You forgot the vows. You forgot the vows."

Do you have any idea how embarrassing it is to have a nice couple on their special day, to overlook the one thing that is most important? After it was over, I saw the soloist. I walked up to him and I said, "I may be a veteran preacher. That was a rookie mistake." Dark chapter.

You know Carlyle Marney was wrong... right about a lot of things, but he was wrong to say many Christians define sin as the sum total of acts which they themselves would not commit. I think we know what we've done. Dwight Moody said it right, he said, "I have more trouble with Dwight Moody than any other person I know." I can tell you this, the biggest problem I have with any person in the church is with me. Or as Paul said, "The

good that I should, I don't. The bad that I shouldn't, I do." The painful past. A dark chapter.

Years ago I was visiting with a man in a church, not here. President of a bank. He was talking about his life and he began to talk about the second world war. He remembers the day that he killed a soldier in Italy. It had happened decades before, and in his mind he was still a murderer, in his mind. I remember the day I was visiting with one of the United Methodist bishops in our denomination. She recalled that time when she was in high school, and she became pregnant, and she had an abortion, and she just thought about that, and continued to think about that. There was the day a young man came into the office-- again, years ago-- he worked for an investment company, and they had these practices that were deceiving and really dishonest, and everyone was encouraged to engage in those activities, and he was good at it. But because of the system in place and how well he did, he was promoted and others weren't. They were let go.

The dark chapter in our lives, when we cheated and didn't get caught. When we took advantage of someone because we knew we could, and got away with it, and we remember it, and we can't forget it, and we can't forgive it. It was our painful past, and we can blame it on ignorance or passion or drugs or drink or fear, the painful past, and we dislike who we are, hostile about what we've done. Zacchaeus in the tree. Jesus saw him there. God sees us there. The painful past makes us feel small. We want to be by ourselves. Hostility toward ourselves. And then let's hope it happens, the poignant moment when we are brought back down to earth. Jesus told Zacchaeus, "Come down from the tree, be with your people. Come down to earth."

And that beautiful segment of Buechner's book that David read so well. Bishop Frank Tracy Griswold, bishop of the Episcopal church, thought about his life, the good he had wanted to do, the harm he had done, the way it was. And what he had become. And the voice, God, Jesus, he heard, the voice I hope we all hear when we need to hear it. Those words, spoken, "Why do you take your sins more seriously than I do?" At first he laughed, then he cried. So much time given to the painful past, so much energy directed to what we should have done. So much life invested in what we could be that we missed the good we are. There comes a time to come down to earth and to face up to the hostile self and to heal a painful past. A poignant moment for when we come down to earth we aren't as small as we thought. We're bigger, and we begin to look at others, and we see ourselves, we're equal. Not bigger than they, not better, but no smaller.

Robert Fulghum in his book *What on Earth Have I Done?* He was in Crete, he was on a seaside road and lost. Ever been over there, or anywhere, and it's not on your map, and you don't know where you are? He's in a small village and this old man is leading an old goat, and Fulghum gets out of his car and walks over to where the man was. "Where am I?" And the old man and the goat looked at him with puzzled amusement. "What kind of question is that?" as if speaking to a child. "Well, you're over there." He carried the map across the road and stood beside the man and his goat. "No, where are we?" With amused pity, he put his hand on his shoulder, pointed to the ground. "We are here," said the man. Fulghum showed him the map, and the empty space where there should have been a

village, and there could have been a road, and he scratched his head, and the old man said, "Where did you get the map, Athens?" and he laughed. "Athens?" He explained it to his goat, and the goat laughed. "Nothing good comes out of Athens." Fulghum thanked him, got back in his car. "Where are you going," said the old man. "I don't know," said Robert. "I don't know." And the old man laughed and smiled and waved goodbye, talking to his goat as if to say, that is the first thing he said that made any sense, he didn't know where he was, how could he know where he was going? Neither he nor the goat were lost. They were there. There. A poignant moment. Come down to earth. Forget our titles, our degrees, down to earth, you're here. We're here.

G. K. Chesterton, you know, you come Friday, you're going to hear him, or someone who's going to look like him and talk like him. G. K. Chesterton said, "You know, it may be that God says to the sun every morning, "Wake up" and the moon every night "Rise ." Boy, did you see that one last night? Chesterton didn't say that, I did. Wow. Or this morning. That was a moon. Closer than it's been in sixteen years. Then Chesterton said, "God makes all the daisies, every one different, because God doesn't get tired. God like doing it." We're all here. Eboo Patel in his book Acts of Faith writes about how much we have in common. He's a Muslim who denounces violence that young people of his faith have chosen in the name of religion. He talks about when he was in school with Jews and Christians and there was an assignment one day given to all of them. They were to find a faith hero in your tradition that exemplifies the shared values. He said "It was then that I realized it was in every tradition, including Islam, that we were all of a strong tradition of pluralism and service, and that we have much in common." He said, "It changed my life. It changed my life."

Because we're all here. A poignant moment. I'm here. You're here. We're here together. Saturday I came into the church for this wedding. A guy got off his motorcycle and looked at me and walked into the chapel. I followed him into the chapel. I said, "May I help you? Are you looking for someone, or maybe have you come for the wedding?" He looked at me and he said, "No, I'm just here." I said, "So am I." I guess we're just both of us here together. Eventually he left, but he stayed, and it was good that he came. If he needed healing, I hope he found it. Maybe it was a poignant moment. That's why we keep the chapel open all the time. It's a place for people to come down to earth, a poignant moment, down to earth. When the earth shakes, it isn't over there, because it's over here. When the waters roll, it's not about them, it's about us, and we cry with them, and we look at what they have shown us. No looting in Japan, just helping and order. People just like our people. A tragic event turns a poignant moment and healing happens.

And then a happy ending. Painful past, poignant moment, hostility turns to healing, and then hospitality. And then we can see a powerful directive, a happy ending, just like Jesus did for Zacchaeus, and this is where I'm going to tell you that there's something better than the golden rule. He could have given Zacchaeus a lecture on how he messed up his life, but he didn't. For some obscure parable to ponder that would be written down, and we'd get it to ponder it. David would preach on it. Or a list of things he could have done to improve his character, but he didn't. He could have given him a test to see what he had learned from the experience, if anything. But he didn't. One who is without sin speaks to

one who is a sinner. Come down to earth. Hostility turns to healing when healing turns to hospitality, a happy ending. Zacchaeus, take me to your home. We're going to have lunch.

Okay, here's where I said where I wanted to go. This is the point I wanted you to see. Here it is. Brace yourself. We may believe that religion comes down to the golden rule, but if we do as Jesus did, it comes down to more than that, because "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," the Golden Rule, Jesus approached it differently. His rule was "Do unto others as they need you to do unto them." Boy, that's different. He did what was best for the person for whom it was being done. Zacchaeus, take me home. Let's have lunch. I would be honored to be in your house. Hospitality is doing for others what they need us to do. It's a powerful directive. It leads to happy endings. It means you let your friend tell you the story again that they told you a hundred times before, and if there's a little humor in it you laugh. It means you stand back when you could step in and allow your children to learn an important lesson, when you could have told them and saved them the trouble. But you do it. It means you allow yourself to be served when your first choice would be to be the one serving. It makes our outreach responsive to the needs of the served, not driven by our need to reach out. It means we help other people not because in our position of superiority we are condescending to give, nor with our sense of painful past are we driven by guilt to be givers, but just because we are down to earth and altogether we are driven by common humanity to be humane, by our sense of common decency to be hospitable.

I end with a story, a true one. Last Sunday, on the way out of church there was a couple. They were new to the church. Now, I didn't preach last week, nor the week before. They were looking at the signs and the bulletin and all the classes coming up. They were in the east hallway. That's where I was. There's a class on healing. There's a class on "Paul wasn't a Christian." There's a class on Chesterton's presentation, "Looking at the world upside down." There's a class on Barbara Brown Taylor's book, *An Altar in the World*. It's at The Egg & I restaurant. If you go to The Egg & I restaurant on College, on Monday morning at 8:00, you're going to be there for a nice breakfast, because this class is over on Harmony--that Egg & I restaurant. There's a class on Jesus last week, a Women of Worth class. It goes on and on. All the classes. The new couple to the church did not know who I was. I could have said, "Can I tell you a little more about our church? Can I give you a tour, bring you into the sanctuary, change the color of the pipes. Do you have any questions?" I could have done that. Instead, I said to them, "Boy, these people in this church, they seem to need a lot of education. I wonder why they spend so many hours in classes. What's wrong with these people? And some of these classes are really weird. Like, what's this thing about 'Paul wasn't a Christian'? for example? What's that about?" They looked at me and they said, "No, you're wrong, we love it here. This is a great church. That's why we've come." Then they said, "What's your name?" and I said, "Bob Richman."

They were the evangelists, because I let them be. Sometimes the more you know, the less you need to say, because we're all in this together. Do unto others what they need to have done unto them, is a happy ending that will heal any painful past.

