

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.'

**“What Do You Say to a Sinner?
What Would You Say to Zacchaeus?”**

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March 21, 2010**

I thought that was great, that Bev asked who is this short little guy whose name begins with Z, and they knew. I was thinking, I should have asked the congregation that, and see how many of you knew that. I know you all did.

Well, the day is approaching. April 15. A day that causes most or at least many people to cringe at the very thought of it. Taxes. A lot of people, when they think about taxes, they have a response, internally or externally. Government, IRS, tax collectors, those are the things associated with April 15. It wasn't all that different in Jesus' day. Except, that instead of paying your taxes as we do, to an impersonal thing like government or IRS, there were literally personal tax collector in Jesus' day. And the tax collectors were employees of the occupying power of Rome, and the tax collector did not have a set amount that he could collect. He could collect all that he could, and then give Rome what was due Rome, and keep the rest for himself. Tax collectors were unscrupulous, many of them, and they were anathema to most Jewish people. But it was a lucrative occupation.

So here comes Jesus, going into Jericho, and this short little guy that they knew about, Zacchaeus, that was his name, he couldn't see over the heads of the people in front of him. Have you ever had that experience at a parade? He couldn't see, so he went to Plan B. He wanted to see this Jesus of Nazareth about whom he had heard. And so he climbed a tree, a sycamore tree, and he could see Jesus. But Jesus also sees him. That's important to note. Seeing is an important part of what it means to walk in the footsteps of Jesus as his disciple. Seeing who and what are really there. Seeing.

Sherlock Holmes and Watson went out camping. They pitched their tent. When the night time came, they crawled into their tent and went to sleep, and some time during the night, Holmes woke up. He woke up Watson and he said, "Watson, tell me, what do you see?" Watson said, "I see millions of stars." "Well Watson, what does that tell you?" "Well, astronomically, it tells me that there are millions of galaxies and possibly billions of

planets. Astrologically, it tells me that Saturn is in Leo. Timewise, it tells me that it's about quarter after three. Meteorologically, it tells me that today is going to be a wonderful day. Theologically, it tells me that the Lord is all-powerful and we are small and insignificant. Holmes, what does it tell you?" And Sherlock says, "You idiot, Watson, somebody has stolen our tent."

The Christmas song says, "Do you see what I see?" Do you see through the eyes of Jesus? To see with his eyes is to see people. Not caricatures. It's to see people who, like us, are created in the image of God, people whom God loves, as God's own child. Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, come down here." He knew his name. He not only saw him, he knows his name. Names are important. Have you ever participated in some group for quite a while and discovered that people still don't know your name? I attribute that to my age. But younger people can't do that. I don't know that I can, either, actually. Names are important. We all like to be known by our name, don't we? Remember the TV series "Cheers," that bar in Boston "where everybody knows my name"? Wow. Names are important. Ross Snyder in his book *Inscape* talks about that. He says, "My name is shorthand for the fact that I mean something. When I or another person speak my name, there comes rushing a sortie of past events of which I was a part. A whole history peeks up through the sound of my name. Also, the new possibility I mean right now. When people call me by name, I know that I am something distinctive, irreplaceable."

As long as someone is looked upon as enemy or intruder into my life, I can harbor attitudes that divide. But knowing a name will change everything. I found that to be true when I met Tom. We were looking for a new director of our music program in my last church. Organist/choir director. We advertised. We had a number of applicants, most of whom didn't have a clue how to play the organ that we had. But Tom knew. Tom could play that organ so that it would sing. Maybe not quite as good as Karen, but good. And he was able to take the choir and bring forth music that we had never heard in that church, kind of like James. We were going to offer Tom the job, and I remember sitting in my office saying to Tom, "We would like you to come and be the director of music in our church." He said, "Well, Ray, before I accept that, there's something I need for you to know. I don't want to be a problem for your ministry here, so you need to know that I am gay, and I have lived for eleven years in a committed relationship. Now, if that is a problem, I will not accept the position." Well, to say the least, it was a surprise to me. But ultimately, we offered Tom the job of director of our music program. He took that program to heights beyond where it had ever been before. He became loved by the congregation, and he was my friend. Because he was my friend, one time he asked me if I would speak at the World AIDS Day service that was being held at Mckendrick County College there where we lived, and I accepted. And that evening I met people who had relatives who had either suffered from, were suffering from, or had died from AIDS. People, some of whom were quite young, some of whom, because of drugs that they had been given, blood transfusions, some because they were gay. As a result of that, I became very interested in what could I do to help with this epidemic of AIDS? And I saw in the newspaper that there was going to be an AIDS bicycle benefit ride. It was going to be a five-hundred mile ride from Minneapolis to Chicago. I didn't even have a bike, but I signed up. And I learned how to ride a bike. And I raised money from supporters. Tom

helped me do that. 1,800 bikers rode out of the Minneapolis Convention Center on that Monday morning. Maybe half, I don't know, were people who were gay. Some of them were people who were suffering from HIV, and they were identified with a special flag on their bikes. Every evening, we would set up our tent city. Every evening, we would eat meals together. Every evening, we sat and enjoyed entertainment that was provided, and the next day we would ride on. I would see, sometimes, people who obviously loved and cared for each other, and who expressed that. People who were doing so with people of the same sex, and I saw how much love they were sharing, just the same way I shared my love with my wife. It changed me, that ride, because no longer did I see a mass with the word "gay." I saw Tom. I saw Nicole. I saw Sam. I saw Jane, and many others.

When you get to know a name, it changes your world. Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, come down. I'm going to stay at your house." Whoa, did that push the religious right over the edge. Jesus, this supposed Messiah, going to stay in the house of a sinner, a tax collector, a guy that was at the bottom of everything. How could he do that? And not only that, they were going to have a meal together. And you only have meals with people who are family or friends, people that you love and care about. They could hardly stand it, some of these who were so tied into that law, that religious law. Staying with a sinner.

Frederick Buechner says, "Compassion is sometimes the fatal capacity to feel what it's like in someone else's skin." Joseph Katona, this was in *People* magazine a few months ago, Joseph Katona, age 21, went to a camp in Maine, Seeds of Hope. A Muslim, Omar Dreidi, was also attending that camp. Omar and Joseph became good friends. Omar confided in Joseph and said that he had always dreamed of going to college in the United States but he said, "You know, that's never going to happen because neither I nor my family have the \$42,000 it would take for me to accomplish that." Joseph, his Jewish friend, said to Omar, his Muslim friend, "I'm going to raise the money for you." Omar said he could hardly believe this, that his dream was actually going to come true. Joseph not only raised \$42,000, he raised \$60,000, so that Omar could attend Earlham College in Richmond, Indiana.

Perhaps you have heard, or read in the paper this week, about the CSU students who spent their spring break going to the border in Arizona? They were going to be refilling water tanks for illegal immigrants who crossed the border and are crossing the Arizona desert. If you read the article, you read that these students do not approve of illegal immigration. In fact, part of what they were also doing was crossing the border to put up signs encouraging people not to make that crossing. But they were filling water tanks out of compassion, so that people who did do that would not die of dehydration in the Arizona desert. Compassion is the sometimes fatal capacity for feeling what it's like in someone else's skin.

Tony Campollo, professor at Eastern College in the Eastern part of Pennsylvania. Tony tells about a time when he went to Honolulu to do a speaking engagement. Between Eastern Pennsylvania and Honolulu there are a number of time zones. He was having trouble sleeping, suffering from jet lag, so he got up in the middle of the night, and he decided he would go out and see if he could find someplace where he could just get something to eat.

Most everything was closed, but there was a diner. He went into the diner, sat at the counter, and this large gentleman, owner of the diner, came out, "What do you want?" "Can I have a cup of coffee and a doughnut?" "Coffee" He said the guy picked up the doughnut with his own hand and put it on the counter, not even a napkin. He said he knew that if he went to the back room, and the doughnut had fallen on the floor, that doughnut would have been picked up and put back on the plate. A greasy spoon, he said, So he was sitting there drinking his coffee and eating his doughnut when a number of women began to come in and sit at the stools. They were on either side of him and up at the counter. And they were dressed rather interestingly, and one of the women, sitting on the stool next to him, said, "Well, tomorrow is my birthday." Another one said, "Oh, what do you want? Do you want us to have a birthday party for you?" "No, I don't want you to have a birthday party for me. I was just saying, tomorrow's my birthday." "Well, we don't need to know that." The women got up and left, and Tony Campollo said to the owner, "This woman..." "Oh, you mean Agnes. She's a really nice woman. Comes in here all the time." He said "She's having a birthday tomorrow. What would you say if we throw a birthday party for her?" "That's a great idea." Tony says, "I will bring decorations for the diner, I will bring a cake." "No, I'm going to bring the cake myself. I'll provide the cake," the owner says. So at two-thirty the next morning, Tony Campollo got out of bed, went over to this greasy spoon diner, and decorated the diner. The cake was there. Pretty soon, not only the women who had been there the night before but, he said, it must have been all the prostitutes in Honolulu showed up at the diner. Word spread. He said when Agnes came in, they all shouted "Happy Birthday," and they sang "Happy Birthday" and it candles on the cake, and they said, "Come on Agnes, blow out the candles. If you don't blow them out, we're going to blow them out. Cut the cake." Agnes had tears in her eyes, Tony says. She held the knife and she said, "Would it be okay if I don't cut the cake? Would it be okay if I just take the cake back to where I stay?" She said, "You know, I've never had a birthday party in my whole life, and I'd just like to keep it for a while. So she left. And Tony Campollo said, "Here I am, a preacher surrounded in this diner by a bunch of prostitutes. Now what do I do? Well, what does a preacher do? Let us pray!" So he offered a prayer for Agnes and for all of the women, and so forth. And the owner said, "So are you a pastor?" "Yeah." "Well, what kind of pastor are you? What kind of church are you the pastor of?" Tony said, "Well, I'm pastor of a church that likes to throw parties for prostitutes." The owner said, "Nah, you've got to be kidding." But he said, "You know, if there was such a church, I'd be a member of that church."

See, name, act in love. G. K. Chesterton says, "Let your faith be less a theory, and more a love affair." What do you say to sinners? What do you say?