

Luke 19:1-10

"Out on a Limb"

Monday I had the privilege of having lunch with a small group from Foothills Presbytery and the Associate Director of Evangelism from our denominational office in Louisville, Dr. Ray Jones. As the Chaplain in a Retirement Community for 15 years, Evangelism is not something that I have spent much time with and always filed it away in the "Church growth" category when things I would never need. So I was really surprised to hear him say, "Evangelism is NOT about numbers, it is about sharing the Good News."

Well to show you how little I know, by *definition* evangelism is "the spreading of the Christian gospel by public preaching or personal witness". No mention of numbers! But then he went on to illustrate his point with an incredible true story.

There was a new Presbyterian Church starting up in another town and of course, they did not have the money to buy a building until the church was actually established. Well, it seems the only place they could find to worship together was a local bar in town, but the bar stayed open until 2:00 a.m. on Sunday. So a group of church members had to hang around outside the bar every Saturday night, waiting for it to close. Then they would go in and rearrange furniture, bring in their lectern, their keyboard and so forth to get ready for church.

Of course, at 2:00 in the morning, they would encounter the drunkest people. Young kids who *could* stay up that late, people who could not walk or stand up straight, couldn't speak without slurring their words, people throwing up. And invariably, there would be one church member who would drive someone home or another church member would pay for a cab driver to take someone home safely. Or they would have to mop up spilled beer before they could put out the songbooks or clean up where someone had gotten sick all over the chairs.

Unbeknownst to the faithful Presbyterians, the big, brawny bouncers, whose job it was to stay until the last body had gone home, were watching them. And after several months, one of the bouncers came to the preacher and asked, "Why do you all do this? It is not your responsibility to clean up after these drunk kids or drive them home. We just don't understand you guys!" And his response was, "We are Christians. This is just what we do. It's what our Word teaches us." Well more time passed and the bouncers asked if the church members would take the time to tell them more about what their Word said. And before they knew what was happening, the church was holding a 3:00 a.m. Bible Study for all the bouncers from bars in the area.

But here is the real key to the story - Ray said that not one of the bouncers ever joined their church. However, a whole group of people who would not have known Jesus Christ CAME to know him. Evangelism – NOT NUMBERS BUT SHARING THE GOOD NEWS!!

When Ray talked about the bouncers, I immediately connected them with Zacchaeus from this morning's story in Luke. Because just as it might not occur to one of us to share our faith story with a bouncer in a bar at 3:00 in the morning, the people of Jericho would NEVER have thought about sharing their good news with Zacchaeus. But we all know that Jesus had a habit of offering radical grace to the MOST undeserving people. Jesus was always going out on a limb.

As the story goes, Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem when he passed through Jericho. As always, a huge crowd followed Jesus wherever he went. Many had heard about his teaching and preaching and wanted to see this man for themselves. Some were in need of a healing miracle, which they had also heard about, and hoped to get something from Jesus. And of

course, some were doubtful about his authenticity and wanted to see or hear him do or say something that could be used to discredit him, like the Pharisees.

We don't know why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus but we DO know that he was determined. Unlike the big, brawny bouncers in Ray's story, Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was so "short in stature" that he climbed a nearby sycamore tree just to catch a glimpse of the curious man who some were calling the Messiah.

And not only was Zacchaeus short but he was very unpopular. Some might even say he was hated. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector which meant that he worked for the Roman government and was therefore considered an enemy of the Jews. Not only had Rome oppressed the Jews politically, economically and religiously, but tax collectors were notorious for overcharging them. If Rome, for example, levied a 5% tax, the tax collectors would charge 10% or 15% or whatever they wished and keep the difference for themselves. So tax collectors were viewed by the Jews as the worst kind of sinners.

And true to form, of all the people he could have noticed, Jesus spotted Zacchaeus out on a limb too and, as was his habit, decided to go there as well. He did this by calling Zacchaeus by name and insisting that he come down from the tree and take Jesus back to his house for dinner.

Now to give you an idea of what this would look like at Nazareth Presbyterian, it might look something like the announcement that I read on a random internet blog that said, "I wish every Christian church in America would print this in their bulletin" – SO LISTEN UP FOLKS! THIS IS WHAT RADICAL GRACE LOOKS LIKE. It is also EVANGELISM at its finest.

"We extend a special welcome to those who are single, married, divorced, gay, filthy rich, dirt poor, yo no habla Ingles. We extend a special welcome to those who are skinny as a rail or could afford to lose a few pounds. You're welcome here if you're "just browsing," just woke up or just got out of jail. We don't care if you're more Catholic than the Pope, or haven't been in church since little Joey's Baptism. We extend a special welcome to those who are over 60 but not grown up yet, and to teenagers who are growing up too fast. We welcome soccer moms,

NASCAR dads, starving artists, tree-huggers, latte-sippers, vegetarians, and junk-food eaters. We welcome those who are in recovery or still addicted. We welcome you if you're having problems or you're down in the dumps or if you don't like "organized religion" - we've been there too.

If you blew all your offering money at the dog track, you're welcome here. We offer a special welcome to those who think the earth is flat, work too hard, don't work, can't spell, or because grandma is in town and wanted to go to church.

We welcome those who are inked, pierced or both. We offer a special welcome to those who could use a prayer right now, had religion shoved down your throat as a kid or got lost in traffic and wound up here by mistake. We welcome tourists, seekers and doubters, bleeding hearts ... and you!"

Now, dare we follow Jesus out on THAT limb? What do you think? Friends, I actually don't think I need to spend any more time talking about whether Jesus would like that announcement or not because, in our heart of hearts, we know he would love it! So let's take a look at Zacchaeus instead to try to figure out what brought HIM out on the limb as well.

I think it is clear to us all that Zacchaeus knew that something was missing in his life. There was a great need that drove him to humble himself, gather his toga around his legs and shimmy up that tree. Something within him desperately hoped that seeing Jesus would make a difference in his life.

Maybe he didn't know exactly what he needed. Or maybe he really wanted to change but he did not know where to begin and thought the sight of Jesus would speak to his heart. Maybe change seemed too impossible or his good intentions had failed him so many times in the past that he was almost ready to give up! Do any of these sentiments ring true with you? Because they do with me that is why I am here today.

But here in the midst of our Lenten season, I think the most important thing about Zacchaeus was that once he encountered Jesus Christ, he was willing to make whatever change was necessary to become his disciple. Jesus did not wait for an invitation – he saw Zacchaeus

but also saw the need in his heart. He called him by name and extended him grace and Zacchaeus responded with radical transformation. And that is what this season of Lent is all about. Zacchaeus not only gave up his sinful ways, but agreed to atone for his sins. To pay back MUCH MORE than the law required when restitution was being made. He responded in a way that showed Jesus that he was willing to make a serious commitment - with his life, his time, his talents and even his pocketbook. Across the board gratitude in response to extravagant love.

And as Jesus is known to do when he goes out on a limb, the grace he extended to Zacchaeus was deeper and wider and higher and greater than anything he could have ever dreamed about. You see, Jesus offered him salvation. And friends, salvation is not only the assurance for how we will spend eternity. It is a reality for this life as well. The grace of salvation offers you and me and Zacchaeus the continuing change that God brings to our lives today. Salvation empowers us to live in right relationship with God and each other. Salvation assures us that we are not alone in our troubles and that our brokenness can be made whole.

What's more, Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house!" Not only am I bringing you Good News – I am giving it to all who are here in this place. But the real depth, the real generosity that Jesus offered came when he told everyone who was listening that Zacchaeus was a son of Abraham.

And when he said this, Jesus in effect told Zacchaeus that he was just as good of a Jew as any one there. That he is just as good of a Christian as anyone here. And *THAT* was Jesus' intention in the first place – for Zacchaeus, for those who grumbled at his actions and for you and me. Zacchaeus' story reminds us that everyone in this sanctuary AND outside these walls deserve the chance to hear the Good News! And it begs the question, "Who will tell it to them?"

And in the end, this story also tell us that Jesus had a plan for Zacchaeus' life. When he declared, "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" we know that his trip to Jericho was not a detour or a delay. It was the very purpose of his journey to Jerusalem. And after he shared the Good News with Zacchaeus, he was ready to move toward his destiny. Because he knew *that* is where the cross stood empty, waiting for him. And he knew that the only way to offer this radical salvation was to go out on that limb too. The limb that would lead to the empty tomb of Easter and to resurrection for all who have ears to hear. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.