

Luke 19:1-10 Divine Distractions

I feel a little apprehensive for telling a story about any of my childhood friends. I am not sure where most of them are nowadays. It occurs to me that if I tell stories about them, there is an outside chance, though not likely, that they might show up and be offended, or at least want to tell their side of the story. But sometimes the temptation is too strong, so I will go ahead.

My friend's name is Tom. That is his real name, if I substituted another it wouldn't be him and I would find it difficult to tell the story. We met at the end of the 6th grade when my family moved to a new neighborhood and I went to a new school. He lived only a couple of blocks away. He was also a runner and running drew us together throughout junior high and high school. He was a bit of a free spirit, a roamer, and one never knew where he might turn up or what kind of mischief he might fall into. He was the kind of person who could pick your pocket and make you like him at the same time.

From time-to-time he would call me for something to do, "Hey, let's go to Dairy Queen," or something like that. Since my house was on his way I would always say, "Come on over and we will go." You must understand, he lived close enough that he could run to my house in 45 seconds, two minutes at a normal

walk. About half the time he never showed up. Sometimes, in the minute or two that it took to get from his house to my house he would get distracted and go somewhere else instead. One time I confronted him about this and he said that while he was on the way a friend came by on his way to a park to shoot bottle rockets at cars. Shooting bottle rockets was not enough, they had to be aimed at something. How could he pass that up? It was a can't miss opportunity and he wondered why I wasn't there.

I got used to it after awhile and learned not to expect him. If there are conventions regarding how people should behave and what they should do, he never obeyed them.

Jesus

In this regard he was a little like Jesus who also exercised a curious freedom when it came to the conventions of his day. He talked with Samaritans with whom he was not supposed to speak. He spoke also to women in ways that were against the mores of the time. And as I am reminded whenever I look at the painted window in the back of the sanctuary, he even spoke with a Samaritan woman. He ate and drank with tax collectors and sinners and picked grain and healed people on the Sabbath. And from time to time when he

was on his way somewhere he got distracted and went places not on his itinerary.

In this story he is on his way to Jerusalem for what would turn out to be the last week of his life. Along the way he passed through Jericho which was a kind of rest stop in the middle of the long journey from Galilee to Jerusalem. He was distracted by a blind man whose sight was restored. As if he just couldn't keep to his schedule he stopped to talk Zacchaeus who had climbed a tree to see him. And he didn't just chit chat back and forth for a few minutes, but invited himself to dinner. One can imagine his handlers were frustrated trying to keep him to whatever it was they thought of as his script.

Issues

There were issues. The first is that Zacchaeus was wealthy, and, especially in Luke's Gospel, wealth is a bad thing. Of all the people Jesus could have dined with, did it have to be with one of the wealthy elites? And then of course there is the source of all his wealth, he was a tax collector who took advantage of the people. It was a common practice for tax collectors to take more than what was owed and keep the difference. If this was the way tax collectors were paid, then it may well have been an acceptable practice. But the stories are told of excess; taking so much that it

was oppressive for the payer and created unnecessary wealth for the collector. And he was a collaborator, working with the hated Romans.

Thus Zacchaeus was despised by his own people. In a way *he* was excluded and isolated from the larger community though I am sure few ever felt sorry for him. And Jesus not only acknowledged him, but stayed with him at his house.

Salvation Has Come

Very often, the meaning of a story in the gospels can be seen in the statement attached to the story. Though it is a little surprising, in view of the Lukan emphasis on God's preference for the poor, that Jesus would have given attention to someone like Zacchaeus, who was wealthy at the expense of the poor; the saying clarifies Luke's understanding of the gospel message;

"For the Son of Man came," he said, "to seek and save what was lost."

We are very good at passing judgment and it is easier for us to see why God would want to save what is not really lost to begin with. A text like this one is challenging because it stretches our understanding of God's mercy and extends it even to those we feel

comfortable condemning. I say “we” because in this story *we must* see ourselves as among the mutterers.

“All the people saw this and began to mutter, ‘he has gone to be the guest of a sinner.’”

At this point I could go down a list of “sinners” in terms of the way we understand things; I imagine that in your mind you may be running down your own list. This story gives us a reason to pause. Unless your list includes yourself; unless it includes yourself at the top of the list, then it is just so much muttering. There is no one who escapes the list of sinners. And there is also no one who can escape the reach of God’s mercy.

Zacchaeus may not have been able to see Jesus without climbing a tree, but Jesus could see him up there in that tree and was apparently distracted by the sight of him. Any one who seeks Jesus will distract him sooner or later and when that happens, salvation comes. That is good news, and it is good enough that we ought not begrudge the others whose houses the Lord has also blessed with salvation.

My Old Friend

I haven’t seen my old friend in close to 35 years and have not been able to find him on the internet. In the time I knew him his “Huckleberry Finn” style

wanderings led him into trouble that included expulsion from high school, a hospital bed on at least one occasion, and a jail cell on another. But one day he too stumbled onto salvation. It happened to him at what we used to call a “charismatic” church, which is just another way of saying “pentecostal,” only 1970’s style. He went there on a dare one New Years Eve after he had been drinking and was “slain in the Spirit” and he spoke in tongues and as uncomfortable as those things are for us stayed, old-school Baptists, that experience changed him and quite literally saved his life, just like little old Zacchaeus’ life was changed forever when Jesus was distracted by the sight of him up in that tree.

Strain to see, reach for God, never mind what the others are doing; the good news of this wonderful story is that God is distracted by the sight of your straining to see Him, to hear Him, to follow Him. And when the divine distraction comes as it most assuredly will, then also comes the blessing, “Today salvation has come to this house.” And when the blessing comes, then comes the change like it did for Zaccheaus when he paid the people back four times over. What a reconciliation that must have been?

[Back](#)

[Home](#)