

“Invitation to Repentance”

Sunday, July 25, 2010

Luke 19:1-10

In the very last two verses of the passage I have chosen for this series of sermon inspired by the verb “Invite” Jesus says to Zacchaeus, “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.” So as the Pharisees, the religious leaders of the day, who should have exploded in ecstatic joy at the conversion of Zacchaeus but instead grumbled and groused, Jesus went home with Zacchaeus. They got lost in the what we discussed last week in the signs of station and status. What appeared to them to be improper was really a moment of monumental moral and spiritual repentance. So many people got lost in this week’s most provocative story and pathetic yet now poignant parable about race, class, gender and human rights in America today. Shirley Sherrod, Department of Agriculture, employee, daughter of a father murdered by a white man, not convicted of the crime, confesses in a public setting her rage and appetite for really rather rational revenge in response to killer racism. Ms. Sherrod recites her miraculous repentance and return to core human values against the great odds of the hatred and anger she would be expected to demonstrate in the face of such insidious injustice. She shared in the setting of an NAACP meeting that she thought about refusing an old, white farmer service in retaliation for what a murderous white man had done to her by killing her father, but ultimately she could not refuse. All of that negative energy she threw into careful consideration of all the complex cavern of concerns and came out caring. Caring about the poor. That is Luke’s point about Jesus. He cares about the poor, he cares about lonely, he cares about the meek, he cares about the mild, he cares and about the sick, he cares about the grieving, he cares about the hungry, he cares about the homeless, he cares about, he cares about the dying, he cares about lost – no matter how you are lost. And for this caring Jesus was crucified. Almost on cue the cover story about Shirley Sherrod gives us the gift of gracious intervention. She too was crucified of a sort. Judged, and dismissed without a fair hearing by everyone involved, all because she dared to tell the tale of her tender turn from the terrible temptation to trample on someone who had done her no wrong. Her confession led to repentance which in turn provided a grand gesture of grace that, in its context, probably caused and little trouble. The kind of trouble making we talked about: trouble comes when you embrace what you’re expected to exclude; trouble comes when you value someone more than something; trouble comes when the poor become prominent and the prominent become poor. Bob Herbert in his New York Times opinion entitled “Thrown to the Wolves”, stated, “The Shirley Sherrod story tells us so much about ourselves, and none of it is pretty.” The Obama administration, the NAACP and Fox News all came exactly to the same conclusion: “Shirley Sherrod had to go – immediately! First the insidious posting of the 20 year old video, with its selected short by Andrew Breitbart, former Washington Post and Huffington Post journalist, then the rush to repudiate by the NAACP, and then the release from position by the Obama administration. Herbert goes on to say that, “Ms. Sherrod came to the realization, as she witnessed the plight of poverty-stricken white farmers in the South more than two decades ago, that the essential issue in this country “is really about those who have versus those who don’t.” Now that is a mouth full. Something Dr. Martin Luther King understood for which he paid the ultimate price – his life. He paid the ultimate price because he had the audacity to articulate that black folks and poor white folks and for that matter poor folks of all colors and hues not only deserved human rights but economic

justice as well. But that is a topic for another day. I think I love Shirley Sherrod, Oh, I don't mean romantically, but I mean in a rip-roaring, revival, repentance kind of way. Personal testimony of how I got over the temptation to sin; personal commitment to treat others right because God treats me right and personal growth both in the spirit and in addressing the social context in which I find myself. Have you experienced something like that? Zacchaeus did. The open mind, the change of heart and the creative concern to create a new story and to stand straight and tall - throwing off the story others, the Pharisees, the religious leaders and various members of the crowd wanted to tell, coming to grips with his own prejudices, biases, fears and feelings and deciding to go deeper and discovering divine grace, wisdom and love in his own home and in his own heart. Repentance is the central and critical catchword of this collection of inspired words. When we carefully and critically face our own character, context and community-at-large we live into all of the anti-creative attributes of self and society. And when we discover and determine our own complicity in it all we have a choice to make. We can turn around and make it right or turn away and make more of a mess. Jesus comes to save the lost. There is a very famous biblical story – a parable that Luke tells that illustrates the point of a personal relationship with someone who loves you, me us no matter what. The prodigal son, the reckless son, the son driven to distraction desiring all manner of disastrous delights wakes up one morning only to see the light and concludes that in the poverty of his personal place he is no better and in fact worse off than the servants who work in his father's fields. If you will allow me to interrupt my own train of thought to go inside the story a little too far perhaps I promise I'll get back to the principle point promptly. Servants, the father had servants. Does that mean slaves the father had slaves. Were they treated right, did they get enough to eat, did they have families to support, did the master father care for them as if they were members of his own family. I have no way of knowing but it I can't help but wonder. Just like I can't help but wonder that the knee jerk firing of Shirley Sherrod makes aware of what one person shared in her comment on that New York Times piece I started this sermon with. LAS from Redmond, Washington wrote : "What happened to Sherrod happens to workers throughout the country because of "at will" employment law. An employee can be fired at any time without cause. Corporate performance review practices requiring managers to place half of their employees in the lower ratings categories result in the construction of false aspersions to justify the reviews. Furthermore, job applicants can be turned down on the basis of any hearsay collected in a background check, with no right to know who was interviewed and what was said, and with no right to defend oneself against such hearsay. A defendant in a criminal court has more rights than a job applicant undergoing a background check." The story of Ms. Sherrod is not unlike the parable of the Lost Son filled with opportunities to check our character and chart a new course. The wayward son returns ready to live in some less-than social status but before he can return all the way, his father runs to meet him, embraces him and welcomes him home. Zacchaeus is now that returning child, you and I are that returning child. Jesus stopped for a single person – Zacchaeus, me and you. "Today" – not regret about yesterday or worry for tomorrow but "Today" a pleasant present came for Zacchaeus because he wanted to see so badly. In closing out his reflections on the passage, R. Alan Culpepper writes, "Today can be filled with joy because God is still at work bringing the kingdom and because words of grace can still be spoken and forgiveness can still be experienced. What outrageous good news—a camel passed through the eye of a needle!"