

“Inviting Trouble”

Sunday, July 18, 2010

Luke 19:1-10

Trouble comes in many forms. Little did Zacchaeus know that Jesus was trouble. “Here comes trouble my uncle Charlie would say when he saw me coming.” He didn’t mean to say I was somehow to be avoided, ostracized and/or apprehended. I was just someone to be received with a ready amount of open curiosity and more than casual opinion. I’ll never forget the summer day I stood on the bank of the pond casting my little fishing rod. All of about 5 years old there I stood when a big old carp took hold of the baited hook and yanked that fishing rod out of my hand. Without hesitation, without thinking, without fear, without taking off my boots – I dove into the pond to reclaim my fishing rod. That’s the first time I heard my uncle say to my father something about me being trouble or that I was going to give him trouble. Somehow I knew that my uncle didn’t mean trouble in the usual sense but trouble in some kind of special singular purpose sense. I liked to think that he meant that I would have a mind of my own, an uncommon calling and a will to wonder. I understood by calling to be just that to be someone received with a ready amount of open curiosity and more than casual opinion. There certainly was no casual opinion about Jesus. The Pharisees, the Jewish Religious leaders of the day asked: “Who is this who is speaking blasphemies?” (Luke 5:21). Those at the table in Simon the Pharisee’s house asked, “Who is this who even forgives sins?” (Luke 7:49). Herod, the king in (Luke 7:20) says, “John I beheaded; but who is this about whom I hear such things?” Then, Jesus’ own disciples ask one another, “Who then is this?” (Luke 8:25). Last Sunday we answered the question of Jesus’ identity. We learned that the Son of Man has authority to forgive; he is the Lord of the Sabbath; his followers will be persecuted; he eats and drinks with everyone; he is a nomad; he came to seek the lost; he will be betrayed by one of his own and he will return in glory. In using the phrase, the Gospel of Luke alternates between humility and honor. The only conclusion we can draw is that there is honor in humility. By eating with tax collectors and sinners – eating with people no one else would willingly and willfully choose to chew the fat with – Jesus upsets the powerful, the proud and the proper. That’s trouble. The agenda is no longer controlled by the crew endorsed by Caesar. The agenda is a hopeful, honest, heartfelt and hallelujah happening. It is telling that even after spending so much time with Jesus, his closest followers don’t experience the extent of his holiness until after he is gone. The blind man who, literally could not see and the little man who climbed the tree because the crowd blocked his view – got to see it. They got to see the hallelujah thank you Jesus. So if Jesus confronted conformity and when we read the stories of Jesus our hearts hop and our minds move, why are we so timid and tense to do the same? Maybe it is because we aren’t sure what kind of trouble is expected of us? Luke defines “sinners” primarily as those who were shunned by the Pharisees and scribes. Trouble comes when you embrace what you’re expected to exclude. Luke shares a lot about the blessings of poverty and the dangers of wealth. Trouble comes when you value someone more than something. Luke presented the poor prominently. Trouble comes when those who think they’re prominent are treated poorly. Jesus habitually associates with tax collectors and sinners and heroically assails the rich and powerful. Popular theology held that the rich were blessed of God, funny how very little has changed. Even if we dismiss as ridiculous rubble the prosperity gospel touted by several TV preachers, we still stand behind status and station to send the right signals. Jesus turns our popular theology on its head, maintaining that God will dismiss our idolatry and demand our full intentionality. The best way I know of to get in the position to be trouble is to ask questions when everyone else is content to accept the anticipated answer. I’ll never forget the question and answer that

inspired a season of trouble making in the North Philadelphia community I shared in for 15 years. In the late 70's through the mid 1980's I supported the neighborhoods effort to confront illegal drug trafficking that resulted in so many folks becoming addiction to crack cocaine. Almost at every community meeting, attended by mostly women, in the midst of planning a rally, march or drug-free activity, invariably someone would stop strategy session and ask – how can we do this alone, where are the men of this community? Silence would slide through the crowd and a sadness would sting the group. No answer, no response just stilted silence and stifling sadness. But on one ominous, omnipotent evening, as the usual agenda advanced, we got to the part of the evening as if right on cue the question came: Where are the men? Instead of silence and sadness someone shouted: They're all in prison. The courage to speak the truth was born in everyone gathered there in that church hall. The truth was that all of the men who could bring brightness, boldness and blessing were in Holmesburg, Graterford, Muncy and any other number of prisons throughout Pennsylvania. The courage to speak also gave those gathered the courage to cast an alternative vision. Those gathered knew that the men of their neighborhood were absent from the present because of a past riddled with wrongs both theirs but more incredibly ours as a society still unrepentant of racism and blind to the fact that men of color were and still are overrepresented in our nation's criminal justice system. Inspired by this great awakening some of us move into the troubled waters. We got elected to the Pennsylvania Prison Society's Board of Directors, applied for and received the right to make official prison visits, discovered incredible, intelligent and inspired men of color from North Philadelphia, West Philadelphia, Southwest Philadelphia, Germantown and many other neighborhoods. The most incredible encounter was with a group of men at Holmesburg Prison who had successfully sued and won a major prison overcrowding case and who were now designing a comprehensive community based re-entry program – a way to return the men to the neighborhoods that so desperately needed them. After several sessions and a thorough review of the program design, I along with others from the outside were convinced to care about this effort and these men. We pledged our support and for me it meant opening my home as a temporary headquarters. First Jessie, then Rob and then Thomas completed their sentence and were released. Each in turn found 1209 W. Lehigh Avenue and the effort to restore the neighborhoods they ransacked began. As you can imagine there were real problems to deal with – relapses into addiction, physical health setbacks, relationship failures, professional challenges, organizational differences and fits of failure. Through it all there was that kind of trouble making and trouble living that only Jesus could inspire: ex-offenders (prodigal sons and eventually prodigal daughters) feeding senior citizens, mentoring youth, confronting drug dealers and advocating for neighborhood investment, all out of the parsonage of a United Methodist Church. At first, the councilperson didn't like the idea, the committeeperson didn't think too highly of the plan and "surprise surprise" the church folk weren't that all enthusiastic either. But when Jesus invites himself into your neighborhood who can resist the reign of repentance, reconciliation, restoration and resurrection that comes with him. Can you imagine how fantastic those words must have sounded to Zacchaeus? Come down out of that tree! Stop embarrassing yourself! Stop feeding into the stereotypes! Stop living a soulless and sinful life in a system set up to make it so. Don't be afraid! Come down and out and receive and live my salvation. The down and out – you and me – Jesus invites us all into his life and that should mean trouble. Next Sunday wrestling with the topic – **"Invitation to Repentance."**