

“You’re Invited”

Sunday, August 22, 2010

Luke 19:1-10

It was seven weeks ago when I declared my independence from the lectionary – that weekly ledger of lessons from the Bible; that scriptural syllabus of stories and scenes from salvation history and that calendar of cadences of the church year. Six sermons on Zachaeus seems surreal but it has been, for me and I pray for you, spiritually stimulating. And even if the effect is less dramatic for you – a pastor spiritually alive and alert cannot be a bad thing. I wonder if anyone can remember the titles of the first five sermons in the series: “Invitation Initiated,” “Positioning to Get Invited,” “Inviting Trouble,” “Invitation to Repentance,” and “Invitation to Reparations.” And what are the teaching take-ways:

- God is bold enough to come into our lives even when we think we don’t need God or deserve God – we must do the same with loved ones, neighbors, friends and even enemies and strangers
- What a challenge it is for us, even the so called people of God, to position ourselves to receive the truth and trust of Jesus the timeless teacher
- Jesus dismisses our idolatry and demands our inspired intentionality. Asking questions when everyone else is content to accept easy answers and embracing those we are expected to exclude invite the righteous kind of trouble
- When we carefully and critically face our own character, context and community, we come face to face with sin – our own and that of oppressive systems. And when we discover and determine our own complicity in it all we have a choice to make. We can turn around and make things right or we can turn away and make more of a mess
- We cannot ignore, deny or expect impunity from actions that deny the humanity of others. Jesus senses, seeks and stimulates us in a way that results in reconciliation and resurrection.

The opening of the Order of Service for the Sacrament of Holy Communion is this Invitation – “Christ our Lord invites to his table all who love him, who earnestly repent of their sin and seek to live in peace with one another.” This invitation is an apt application of the Zachaeus scene. We reenact that scene and story over and over again when we share the loaf and the cup. We share the grace of God. In his book entitled his [This We Believe](#), United Methodist Bishop, Will Willimon adds to this discussion of God’s inviting Spirit in his description of the Wesleyan concept of prevenient grace. Willimon writes, Prevenient grace (literally, ‘coming before’) is the strange but wonderful way that God intrudes into each life, convincing us of our need, awakening us to God’s presence and gracious availability to us, convicting us of our sin and our need for God, prophetically telling us the truth about ourselves, and lovingly leading us to repentance, gradually, often imperceptibly turning us from preoccupation with self and toward an enthusiasm to do the will of God. Prevenient grace tells us the truth that we are incapable of telling ourselves, strangely empowering us to be better for God than we could have been on our own.” Bishop Willimon goes on to describe two other forms of God’s grace: justifying grace and sanctifying grace, both of which are the products of John Wesley’s thorough theological thinking. Justifying grace is the forgiving love that frames our future even in the face of formidable faults and failures. Justifying grace gains a scriptural seal of approval in Romans 8:15-16 – “ For you did not receive a spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you received a

spirit of adoption. When we cry, 'Abba! Father!' It is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God." Yesterday, my granddaughter experienced me as playful and patient. For more than a half hour I stacked blocks one on top of the other creating a tall tower and time after time Lyla, with a giggle and a gaggle toppled the tower. Hopefully one day she will be just as playful and patient. As the children of God we experience God and it is this experience that shapes our senses and sharpens our sensibilities. Sanctifying grace is the audacious application of grace that causes us to grow in grace not just survive our sin. It is the sanctifying grace of God that shows what God can do with the dust of the earth and the air of the sky. 2 Corinthians 5:16-20a says it well, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once knew Christ from a human point of view, we know him no longer in that way. So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new. All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ." This is the grace (prevenient, justifying and sanctifying) that accompanies Jesus on the way to Jerusalem and as he meets the blind man and Zachaeus in the city of Jericho which is about 15 miles northeast of Jerusalem. This is the grace that accompanies each of us in our daily lives. My golf game really stinks. Don't get me wrong, I don't have unrealistic expectations but I would like to be better. But being better requires persistence, patience and above all else practice. My muscle memory fails me not because I'm getting older and less flexible. It fails me because I don't repeat the right swing enough times to lock it in place. I don't dedicate and discipline myself to the purpose of two putting instead of three, four and five putting. Practice makes perfect. What is interesting to me is that what is required of us as Christians when it comes to sin. What we are called to practice is not just repentance but forgiveness also. In Matthew 18:21-22, Peter asks Jesus "Lord if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him. "Not seven times, but, I tell you seventy-seven times. I suppose my golf game would improve if between games I practiced hitting each club seventy-seven times. I speculate too that my spiritual and social life would improve significantly as well if I would forgive others repeatedly and if I would confess my sins regularly. Practice makes perfect. The proverb has been traced back to the 1550s-1560s, when its form was 'Use makes perfect.' The Latin version is: 'Uses promptos facit.' That's right, we must be willing to put our muscles – spiritual, intellectual, and physical - to use before anything can happen, not to mention "going on to perfection." With Jesus, we see that anything can happen – the blind behold, the lame leap, the poor prosper, those filled with petty prejudice perish and people like you and me can become beatific. So what does the invitation to be a follower of Jesus mean; what does the invitation to become a part of this congregation mean? You may have been invited by someone but you were open to the idea because of the initiating love of God, the stories of Jesus or the leading of the Holy Spirit. Now, that you're here: You're Invited to practice your faith. You're Invited to repent of our sin. You're invited to cause trouble by asking hard questions. You're invited to be who you are. You're invited to grow beyond your comfort zone. You're invited to pay attention to the problems of others. You're invited to be loved unconditionally. You're invited to receive hope and honor. You're invited to eat, fellowship, sing and dance.