

Bridgenorth United Church – Sunday November 10th, 2013
Sermon “The Long and Short of It” Luke 19: 1-10

Rev. Dr. Anne Gowans-Blinn

There was a man in Jericho called Zacchaeus...

...“now the Hebrews they were tall...

But Zacchaeus he was small...”

Yet the Lord loved Zacchaeus better than them all...”

I sang that song as a child and it suited me fine...

For Jesus stopped to notice a small man propped up in a tree!

That is...Until our professor of New Testament at Queen’s pointed out to us that in the Greek text the line...

“because he was short in stature...

referred back to Jesus and not to Zacchaeus...”

No matter...his interpretation of the Greek could not erase from my mind my childlike memory of Zacchaeus being “one of us...”

Small like a child...hiding within the branches of a tree...

Hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus...

What I did not learn in Sunday School was that Zacchaeus was socially ostracized,

Politically treasonous,

and ritually unclean...

He was by all accounts the “chief” tax collector with others working under him who collected taxes for the oppressive Roman government

He was a collaborator who pocketed wealth at his own discretion...

while his neighbours lived in grinding poverty...

He may have climbed the tree that day to avoid the crowd who might have taken the opportunity to lay a beating on him...

What we do know because it is written is that Zacchaeus wanted to “see” Jesus...whether he had met Jesus or only heard of him we do not know...and yet Jesus calls him by name...perhaps picking up his name from someone in the crowd...for I am sure it looked rather bizarre to see a grown man in a tree...!

Jesus calls him down from the tree and demands hospitality from him...and the crowd grumbles...look at the company this Rabbi keeps!

“he has gone to be a guest of one who is a sinner!” (v.7)

To judge in the name of God is a frightening thing to be sure...
...and yet to be fair to the people in the crowd their tradition of
hospitality was not casual...if you invited someone to your table it
meant that they had your respect and acceptance...
In Zacchaeus' case...in their minds...this was unthinkable...
And yet what happens to Zacchaeus with Jesus' affirmation actually
"fulfills rather than cancels righteousness..." or in other words...
This was a right thing to do...

Because Zacchaeus has a turn around...
Did hatred from his neighbours change his ways...no...
Did being ostracized by his community change him...no...?
Only when...grace and love was extended to him...
Because of the demand of hospitality from Jesus...
Was Zacchaeus changed...
Grace and love changes lives in a way that hatred and blame cannot.
Jesus saw value in this man...he extended respect...
And Zacchaeus no doubt so hungry for such acceptance...
Came down from the tree...
And it is written that "salvation came to his house" that day...

Salvation in my experience is not one moment in time when all is
changed...salvation in my mind can come to us over and over again.
Whenever a hand of compassion takes our hand and lifts us to our
feet...to me this is salvation...for the Hebrew word literally means
"to make wide" or "to make sufficient"...For you see in this story...
"...the enthusiasm with which Zacchaeus climbs the tree and accepts
Jesus' invitation suggests that he felt he had something to gain from
and give to Jesus...it is only when he is called by name...
And accepted in front of a community that he understands the
generous nature of love...that day he was reminded of God's
abundant grace." (Seasons of the Spirit)

This is a story about "The Way" of Jesus...

For we see that strength was not in height or muscle or power...
The strength came into the story through compassion and
acceptance...which made the crowd grumble...
None the less it was compassion and acceptance that had power in a
world that had closed its heart to this kind of strength!

The Way of Jesus is this...
To make "wide" a path for God's initiative...
In us...in our community...and in the world...
Theologically salvation IS a big word...
A word that even separates Christians from one another...
But I understand the Way or salvation as a day to day opportunity...
To live "at ease in the world" even though it may be difficult...
Salvation is experienced as...Changing direction...
It is those "aha!" moments of life...
It is living with meaning and purpose even when all is dark...
It is knowing that healing is still possible even though within us...
peace and anguish live side by side...

Even though we believe we control our lives...
There are times it is clear that we do not...
The realization of the spirit strong in us...
Carries us when our lives become uncontrollable...
This is self awareness...knowing what is going on inside of us...
Knowing who we are...why we choose what we choose,
And why we do what we do...
Or in other words we become aware of the currents in our lives...
And how we can best ride the rapids...

Salvation is transformation...
The sudden realization or a gradual growth over time...
Where we end up is the important thing...
For transformation moves us from being "me" centered to "spirit"
centered...and even though the world has closed itself to this kind of
strength...we KNOW it is strength that sustains us...

There was a man in Jericho called Zacchaeus...
God became visible to him that day...
Through the compassion and acceptance of Jesus...

And after speaking all the words I have prepared...
It seems to me...
The message I received as a child...
Is with me still today...
Even if we feel small...insignificant...and distant
And even if we climb and climb to be successful...
When we look out...from our perch...
To SEE...to perceive...to understand and to embrace...
Jesus and his way...
The Christ spirit invites us home...
To share a meal of bread and wine...
And we find the way through...