

Scripture and Sermon for Sunday, October 30, 2016

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and you will not listen?

Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save?

Why do you make me see wrongdoing
and look at trouble?

Destruction and violence are before me;
strife and contention arise.

So the law becomes slack
and justice never prevails.

The wicked surround the righteous—
therefore judgment comes forth perverted.

I will stand at my watch-post,
and station myself on the rampart;

I will keep watch to see what he will say to me,
and what he will answer concerning my complaint.

Then the Lord answered me and said:

Write the vision;
make it plain on tablets,
so that a runner may read it.

For there is still a vision for the appointed time;
it speaks of the end, and does not lie.

If it seems to tarry, wait for it;
it will surely come, it will not delay.

Look at the proud!

Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "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."

Let us pray...Amen.

The story of Zacchaeus is a fairly well-known story; well-known enough that a children's song was written about it. Zacchaeus was the richest man in town, rich because he not only did his job as tax collector well, but rich because he regularly extorted money from his neighbors. And, in addition to being rich, Zacchaeus was short. Vertically challenged. He was a small man. And not liked at all. Despised is more like it.

Now, a little background: the name Zacchaeus comes from the Hebrew word for 'innocent' or 'pure'. On the surface though, Zacchaeus doesn't seem so innocent or pure.

Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was passing through town, and he just had to see him. But Zacchaeus wasn't going to be able to see Jesus unless he could get up above the crowds, so he climbed a tree. There in the tree, Zacchaeus got called down by Jesus; Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for a meal.

So grateful for the attention, Zacchaeus repented of his sins: he promised to give half his wealth to the poor, and to give back 4 times what he had taken from his neighbors in extortion.

For Zacchaeus, the crisis was over.

Zacchaeus was short. Short on vision, short on understanding, but when he was forgiven, he became generous and faithful. Zacchaeus had a shortcoming that prevented him from seeing Jesus, that prevented him from being seen by Jesus. Something inside of him urged him to climb a sycamore tree in order to get above the crowd. That way, he could see what all the fuss was about. But once he got above the crowd, Jesus saw him, and invited himself to Zacchaeus's house for dinner.

So if we were to try and put ourselves into this story by Luke, and we were to consider ourselves like Zacchaeus, what might our shortcomings be? What aspects of ourselves get in the way of our seeing Jesus, and what aspects of ourselves get in the way of Jesus seeing us?

It's not physical characteristics that prevent us from seeing Jesus, it's spiritual, it's emotional characteristics.

I know that I am not a very organized person. Although I find ways to compensate for a lack of organizational skills, sometimes I find myself in a pickle because I wasn't organized. I wonder if I sometimes miss Jesus because I'm lost in the piles on my desk, or because I schedule two meetings at the same time.

But I can climb a sycamore tree to see Jesus more clearly. I can pray, in quiet, in private, just him and me. And when I do that, he can see me, and invite himself into my life, so that I have an opportunity to make changes in my life that will lead to forgiveness.

I don't need to be forgiven for my disorganized approach to life any more than I need to be forgiven for being bald: my sin, so to speak, is that I allow myself to be hidden from Jesus, that I avoid him in my busyness, and in my scatteredness, so that I don't have an opportunity to be forgiven, or even make a change.

Zacchaeus was broken in the way he approached the world with his profession, but beautiful in the way he repented.

So once you have identified a shortcoming, something that prevents you from seeing Jesus, the next thing is to identify what your sycamore tree is: what aspect of your spiritual life allows you to get above the chaos, allows you to see Jesus more clearly, allows Jesus to see you, and invite himself into your life?

Self-awareness is a valuable tool in spiritual direction. It helps us have a realistic and calm view of our whole person, the shortcomings and the skills that we possess that make us who we are. But when in our daily lives are we ever asked to look at ourselves, inside and out, in order to assess what parts of us get in the way of our relationship with Jesus? Not often, until today.

The world we live in is obsessed with physical beauty, financial status, celebrity, and material wealth. If you listen to the radio, watch tv, go to the movies, read a magazine or newspaper, you are bombarded with images and messages that speak to your value as a human being based on your beauty, your wealth, your status.

Sometimes I think it was a gift that I went bald in my early twenties. I was forced to realize at a fairly young age that hair is overrated! Once I stopped worrying about whether I had hair or not, I could get on with growing as a person. Now, others in my position have chosen to get transplants, or wear toupees. But that just wasn't for me. Once I figured out that hair is a superficial characteristic that is optional, I was free to be me, just as God made me. Our shortcomings aren't our physical flaws, our shortcomings are the unhealthy ways we respond to traumas in our lives. Our shortcomings are the things we do to avoid contact with Jesus, and by extension, God.

We hide from Jesus in the crowd when we regularly turn to unhealthy ways of dealing with the challenges of our lives. Ice cream, alcohol, opiates, shopping...tobacco, fast food, caffeine...yelling at others, or giving them the silent treatment, holding a grudge, indulging in what comforts us often prevents us from being seen by Jesus, and prevents us from seeing Jesus.

We have to find a sycamore tree to climb. What is it for you? Church? Prayer? Singing and music? Reading scripture? Helping others in need? Self-awareness helps us see

the things that keep us from seeing Jesus. Self-awareness helps us identify the sycamore trees in our lives that help us climb up enough to see and be seen.

Sometime this week, I would ask that you find a quiet moment to yourself. And in the quiet moment, look inside for a shortcoming that gets in the way of you seeing Jesus. Then, just sit with that shortcoming for a few days. And, if you think of it later in the week, find another quiet moment to think about where the sycamore trees are in your life. Pick one sycamore tree to climb, and make yourself visible to Jesus.

When we do that, Jesus will have some words for us. His very presence will inspire us to make changes in our lives that will lead to growth. His forgiveness will prompt us to want to grow into better Christians, better neighbors.

How will we respond to the good news that our sins are forgiven? Will any of us dedicate half our savings to the church? That is what the Luke passage is encouraging us to do.

Right now, at this very moment, our shortcomings, our debts, our sins, are forgiven. But will any of us make a faithful gesture of repentance by dedicating a substantial amount of our wealth in response to our forgiveness, in response to the relief we feel at being forgiven? I certainly hope so!

Each of us has a little bit of Zacchaeus in us: No, none of us extorts money from our neighbors, none of us knowingly defrauds people of their hard earned dollars. But each of us is in need of forgiveness, each of us is a little short on vision, short on understanding just what that forgiveness means. Each of us broken too. Unable to see Jesus, and be seen by Jesus unless we climb a sycamore tree. And each of us is beautiful in the eyes of Jesus when he finally does see us. Broken and beautiful. This is the way the Lord has chosen to save us.

And when we can practice self-awareness so that we see what Jesus sees in us, we will grow.

It is clear to me that Jesus intended to share a challenging message of what he hoped would be our response to the good news of our forgiveness. It is clear to me that until we start changing and growing and giving out of our gratitude for our forgiveness, we

will only give what we feel we can afford. And if we only give what we feel we can afford, the church cannot survive.

Yes, there are times when we need the church to carry us, when we need the faith community to help us. But if we only receive help and never give help, the church cannot survive.

Jesus has put the story of Zacchaeus before us so that we might consider how we, too, can show our gratitude for the forgiveness he bestows upon us. I hope and pray that we each will find it in our hearts to look inside, find our shortcomings, allow ourselves to be seen by Jesus, and then appreciate our salvation, and to give back in proportion to our appreciation: the future of our church, the future of the church, depends upon it.

Shortcomings and sycamore trees. Symbols of how we either hide from our savior, or how we make ourselves visible to him. Let's be visible.

Amen.