

Sermon 4-6-25

Paul Purdue preaching

Every year, early in January we celebrate the Baptism of Our Lord Sunday. We dip our fingers in baptismal font and pick up a shell, river stone, or a little blue glass bead as we pledge to remember our baptism. A church member shared with me how they had kept a blue bead in their pocket for the last few years. Every morning they picked it up off the nightstand, slipped it into their pocket and prayed: "Lord, help me remember my baptism". That year the bead had rafted the Ocoee river, attended Disciple Bible Study, and bore witness at a daughter's wedding.

Remember your baptism.

Believe the Good news: we are incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation.

Renounce wickedness, reject evil, and repent of our sins.

Accept the freedom and power God gives us to resist evil, injustice, and oppression.

Put your trust in God's grace.

Serve Christ as Lord

Unite with the Church. Welcome all people.

Nurture people in the Christian faith and life.

Live according to the example of Christ.

Build a community of love and forgiveness.

Pray, be present, give, serve and bear witness.

A few years later, during Lent, my friend shared how they had moved their little blue bead into their back pocket because their faith felt too comfortable. A round river rock in your back pocket is a nuisance. It makes you shift your position. When we move beyond the spiritual milk, faith comes to us like yeast changing bread. (1 Corinthians 3) Jeremiah 23 speaks of God's word as a fire or even a hammer that breaks things apart. Hebrews 4:12 declares *"the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart, and before God nothing is hidden"* Jesus tells us to be careful when others always speak well of us, but I wonder, If we get too comfortable with what we believe, or if what we believe becomes too comfortable, if we have somehow lost connection with God's perfecting love? (Matthew 5, John 9:41)

The story of Zacchaeus can feel simple, but maybe it is a baptismal pebble in our shoe, asking us to navigate God's call to justice and God's command to love. How do we speak truth and offer grace? How do we stand in solidarity with the wounded and welcome all people? How do we do the right thing and offer mercy? How do we name people as beloved and call out unjust behavior?

Jesus does not meet Zacchaeus at the local synagogue or his tax office in the Jericho business district. Jesus meets Zacchaeus along the road to Jerusalem. Lent moves us towards Jerusalem, "the city that kills the prophets." (Matt 23) Jerusalem contained both King Herod's Palace and Herod's Temple, the name historians gave to the Temple after

King Herod's lavish restoration. Inside the Jerusalem Temple, Jesus will lay so many burns on the religious establishment that the lectionary almost ignores Matthew 23. In Jerusalem Jesus flipped over the tables of the money changers who exploited the poor with an unfair exchange rate and called the religious leaders "a den of vipers". How is that loving? Jesus moves toward Jerusalem, despite Jesus' disciples and some Pharisees warning Jesus "get away from here, Herod wants to kill you" (John 11 Luke 13) Jesus is heading to Jerusalem to take on the sins of the world: to resist evil, injustice, oppression and death itself.

Disciples often surrounded a rabbi as they walked and talked. (John 9) Remember Jesus teaching the two disciples as they walked along the road to Emmaus? (Luke 24) Without Tik-tok or TV, crowds gathered to hear a great story teller, maybe see a miracle, maybe be healed or perhaps get a free meal. So as Jesus entered Jericho, the crowds swelled, walking alongside wondering where Jesus might stop. Ben Witherington and Amy Jill Levine tell us the construction of the Greek, allows that perhaps it was Jesus not Zacchaeus who is a little shorter and harder to see over the crowd. No matter who was taller, Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus and ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree to perch and spy down on everyone. Is that a little creepy?.

"Now Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and wealthy." If the Prosperity Gospel was true, Zacchaeus would be a model disciple! It is not- Jesus warns you can't serve God and Money. (Matt 6) Where did those taxes go? Did the taxes build local schools, feed the unhoused, or open community health clinics? No, the people's hard earned money went to build amphitheaters in Rome, pay the Roman soldiers who occupied Israel, enrich the Roman Patriarchy and build pagan shrines. Roman coins were struck with blasphemy declaring "Caesar is Lord." when Jews worshipped God alone. It is hard to imagine how you might be any more beholden to the Roman Empire than to be a chief tax collector.

Of all the people in Jericho, how in the world could Jesus choose to dine with Zacchaeus? "All the people began to mutter, "Jesus has gone to be the guest of a sinner." How could Jesus drink fine Italian wine and eat fettuccine alfredo and tiramisu with Zacchaeus whose job funded Roman occupation, colonization and oppression? It is so easy to grumble, but grumbling rarely does anything.

It made me wonder, what might you say if you were invited to dine with the governor or the president? Would you even go? If asked to pray, would you offer a blessing or thunder a judgement? The Bible offers both, the book of Isaiah opens with thundering judgement...

How, the faithful city has prostituted itself to business and special interests!
She that was full of justice and righteousness now houses murderers!
Your silver has become dross; your wine is mixed with water.
Your princes are rebels and companions of thieves.
Everyone loves a bribe and runs after gifts.
They do not defend orphans, and the widow's cause never gets to court.

Therefore says the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, the Mighty One of Israel:
Surely I will pour out my wrath on my enemies...
I will smelt away your dross as with lye and remove all your impurities.
I will restore your judges and counselors as before the kings.
And Afterward you shall be called the city of righteousness, the faithful city. (Isaiah 1)

“When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up...” Jesus took a beat. Would it be satisfying to embarrass the wealthy chief tax collector alone up in that tree to quote Isaiah about “everyone loving a bribe”? Surrounded by grumbling disciples, who have left everything to follow Jesus, Jesus calls out “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.” So Zacchaeus came down at once and welcomed Jesus gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter.

Last week we talked about how Love leaves the 99 grumbling sheep to seek the one lost soul. Jesus’ compassion helped Zacchaeus find his way back home. Even before sharing a meal with Jesus, Zacchaeus declares “Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” What if Jesus had looked up in the tree and called out Zacchaeus? Has judgement helped anyone ever get back home? Judgement may even keep us from feeling at home with ourselves, if we believe that we will be judged we will not risk being honest, maybe not even with ourselves.

And yet, there is this river rock in our shoe: what if Jesus never flipped over those exchange tables in the Temple? What if Jesus never called unnamed church power brokers a den a vipers? There are paradoxical demands of love and justice that keeps us off balance. How do we help people find their belovedness and call out the systems that oppress? Faith at times is an uncomfortable baptismal bead making us shift and think. And there are real risks: we risk judgment and silence, we risk unhelpful demonization and tacit approval, we risk weaponizing speech and smoothing over evil. Randy Stonehill described following Christ like a fight on a tightrope. It is easy to fall off one side or the other.

Half of Zacchaeus' fortune will benefit poor people. I imagine Jesus and Zacchaeus talked about how to open clinics and start schools over that fine Italian wine. Jesus welcomes a chief agent of the empire and declares “Today salvation has come to this house, because this person (this chief tax collector, this collaborator with Rome, this one too, is a Child of Abraham- a child of God.” Jesus understood that Zacchaeus was in deep collaboration with Rome, but Jesus saw Zacchaeus in a way the grumbling crowd could not: Jesus saw a child of God, no matter how lost Zacchaeus might have been.

I am always struck by how Doctor King shared that the first motto of the Southern Leadership Conference was “to save the soul of America”. Maybe, we need that kind of mindset again, a courage to call out injustice, and to simultaneously keep our hearts open to people, even collaborators with the empire.

I wish I had some nice tidy bow to wrap around this sermon, but all I have is this uncomfortable baptismal bead to lodge in your shoe. I wonder if when Jesus reached the spot where Zaccheaus hid in the tree, if Jesus, looking up, paused and prayed to himself, “this one too, this collaborator with the empire, this one too is a child of God?” Maybe not, but maybe our baptismal beads can slow us down enough to ponder the demands of love and justice, of speaking up and offering grace, of calling out injustice and naming all people as beloved. May our faith never get so comfortable, that we fail to ponder the paradoxical demands of God’s love for us all and God’s command to work for justice for everyone. Amen