

A wee little man

*Sermon preached by the Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Vicar,
at the eleven o'clock service, October 31, 2010 The Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost.
Based on Luke 19:1-10.*

Most of what I know about Zacchaeus I learned as a child from an inane little song. I am so tempted to sing it for you, but I shan't lest my august dignity be compromised. Preserving that is very important to me. Besides you'd never forgive me: it's like the Christmas song by Alvin and the Chipmunks, the one that is played in Duane Reade from now until after Christmas. You hear it once and spend the rest of the day attempting to get it out of your mind. But here are the words: "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he; he climbed up in a sycamore tree—for the Lord to see."

It is a big weekend for Zacchaeus, the weekend before the midterm election. There was a time in my life when I would have viewed this as a pivotal moment, claiming and maybe even believing that our continued existence seemed to hang in the balance of this point in history or one like it. Age has exposed that as a particular kind of self-absorption. This election is what it is, no less or more important than most elections and not the topic of today's sermon. It also is the weekend following our most recent terrorist event or near-event. I am aware of some deep existential angst inside me about these threats, and I don't diminish them. But on a day to day basis, I simply live, going about my life in a city I love, a city which when prompted I will concede always to be a target but even when so nudged shall refuse for that awareness to be front and center in my consciousness.

It is the weekend after Clint McCance, a member of the school board in Midland, Arkansas, an innocent-enough looking fellow, ranted on

Facebook that "five queers committing suicide" is nothing he cares to mourn and that he would disown his kids were they gay. I am almost—but not quite—as alarmed that, by the wonder of Facebook, one man's meanness achieves instant celebrity, albeit of the notorious variety, as I am by the sting and pain of his hateful words. The only reason to keep talking about this subject is that we *must* keep talking about it. Some gay kid in Midland, Arkansas, or somewhere else no doubt read these words as further evidence of his/her not being worth much. As long as idiotic remarks get said and repeated as though they are true, particularly now with the power of instant sharing, we are obligated to counter them and particularly in places like this.

All of this and Zacchaeus. I ask myself what an ancient story of indeterminate historical veracity about a wee little man can possibly say to us about our lives, about our real lives in which we encounter complex ups and downs that seem pretty far from a sycamore tree in Palestine. I frankly wonder if we might be at the moment when we must finally admit that scripture is obviously and insurmountably anachronistic, not without its occasional charm and inspiration but so solidly of another era as to be worth very little to us now. It is a legitimate wondering and one that people in my circle cannot dismiss as simply unfaithful. I struggle with it all the time. I am sure of one thing: a linear, unimaginative or non-nuanced reading of any scripture is dangerous. At their best these stories point us to God, which is not the same as defining God.

One of the ways we try to make this story relevant—with some success, I think—is to see it once again as evidence that Jesus did not live his life for religious people but “to seek out and to save the lost.” Jesus chose, as the story goes, to have lunch with Zacchaeus rather than with the appropriate people, the right people. And here was the rub for the Pharisees: Zacchaeus was not one of “the right people”; he was remarkably lost, a tax collector, who was despised by his own people for his complicity with the Roman occupiers. The reality was that Jews had to pay the Romans taxes, but to benefit materially from actually collecting the taxes was unforgivable. Zacchaeus’ showing up at the Jesus event was a little like a modern-day proponent of higher taxes showing up at a Tea Party rally. He may have climbed the tree to get away from someone. Jesus is shown in his usual and inevitable tension with his opponents who believe if—and that is a huge if—he is indeed authentic, he would, as they do, only hang out with those who believe and act correctly *as they do*. Jesus just didn’t operate that way. Anne Lamott gives us a modern reminder of the same truth: We “can safely assume,” she writes, “we’ve created God in our own image when it turns out that God hates all the same people we hate.”

A second way that this story morphs from a cute song to an ethical argument about our lives is its witness about the changes in behavior Zacchaeus underwent upon encountering Jesus. The narrator of Luke, writing in the second generation after the death of Jesus, takes care to show that when Zacchaeus was converted, when he met Jesus, every thing changed. Conversion does that; it changes life now. Who knows what it has to do with life after death? We can’t know, but we do know that it changes everything now. And did it ever change Zacchaeus! The gospel says, “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.’”

Zacchaeus was a changed man—not just a man with a changed heart, but a changed man.

His entire lifestyle was built on the wealth that came from his less than honorable vocation; and in the blink of an eye, at least as the story is told—it usually takes longer than that, I think—he gave up his way of making a living and promised to be greatly generous in repaying from his remaining wealth those whom he may have wronged.

Conversion always involves a lifestyle change. When we choose to base our lives on Jesus, we make a choice to live differently, including a choice to relinquish our claim that what we have is our exclusive domain. What we have—yes, even what we have worked so hard to get—is no longer ours alone. We share it. End of story. One of the epistles claims, “that the Lord loves a cheerful giver.” No doubt, but my guess is God also loves a grumpy giver. The behavior of giving is the point; the attitude adjustment will come later (maybe).

Conversion is not all about giving; this is not a sermon about money, not a backdoor way of talking about the fact that we are behind where we must be before the end of the year. You will do what you will about that. This is a sermon—and a gospel—about conversion, about a wee little man who made the choice to lower his lifestyle *and* to live infinitely better. Conversion for him was, and is for us, beyond a doubt about the reordering of priorities. We are not going to go to hell if we never get this right; but until we do, we may live there, which is to say that until we take back some of the power that poorly ordered priorities have over our lives, we will never be truly satisfied. Our holy scripture (and frankly most holy scripture) reminds us that true religion is about learning to love those we have not loved before and not just with our hearts but with our actions, meaning that we do not live without regard to their needs. Far from being just a child’s story, this is a challenging teaching about righteous living.

So in the wake of these surprisingly demanding words and the events of a weekend of increased terror worries and anxieties about elections and hate-speech and meanness that

exist in almost every corner of our globe, I need to remember that there is still a lot of good in this world. And there is. I could show you pictures of my fabulous grandchildren in their Halloween costumes; you could show me yours. We support and hold on to one another in the ways that we can; and life is better for it—when it is remarkable and when it is ordinary and even when it is really scary. As long as wee little men like Zacchaeus and troubled, still evolving, self-important folks like me—and perhaps like some of you—are in the process of being converted, life

will continue to be good. We are in the process of learning what is important and what isn’t, of learning how to love more grandly and more generously; and though we rarely get it just right and it generally takes at least a lifetime to master, that kind of learning never goes out of style. As long as our holy scripture calls forth that kind of change in us, it is unmistakably relevant—and we are going to be just fine, not perfect, but just fine.

In the name of God: *Amen*.

©2010 St. Bartholomew’s Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bartholomew’s and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads write to the parish office, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022, or call 212/378-0222. You can also visit us on the web at www.stbarts.org.