

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The Twenty-Fourth Sunday After Pentecost  
30 October 2016

Scripture readings:

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4    Psalm 119:137-144    Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12    Luke 19:1-10

Don't forget to go home and tell your friends that you did two real foot-tapping hymns in church this morning. *[laughter]* You know when hymns are challenging like that, they're excellent because they invite us to pay attention to the text. There is, I think, on National Public Radio a program that usually ends with "*Remember all music was once new.*" *[laughter]*

The first hymn was written by a man who lived in our day. The other one's from the time of the Reformation. The Reformation - it's not in the Episcopal calendar, but it is in the Lutheran calendar. Tomorrow, the 31<sup>st</sup> of October, is celebrated as Reformation Day. It's the anniversary of when Luther in 1517 nailed the 95 Theses on the Castle Church door in Wittenberg, and that's been used since then as the symbolic start of the Protestant Reformation.

Frank was an hour late this morning. They turned the clocks in Italy. He talked about going this week to Sweden to commemorate the Reformation and work toward full communion with the Luterani *[the Lutherans]*. It's an exciting time for the church! The commemoration of the Reformation comes on the eve of All Saints which is the first of November. That's where we get Hallows Eve, Halloween. It was for a long time, and I think now in perspective, the shameful war cry for Protestants and created an annual opportunity to engender and encourage division in the Church over unnecessary things. When we get to the end of the Church Year we have the celebration of Christ the King which is the last Sunday before Advent. I think that was the Roman Church's response to the huge Reformation celebrations in Europe, particularly Germany. It's nice to be able to reflect on ourselves as Christians and detect growing maturity, isn't it. Can you believe that even Methodists are involved? *[laughter]* And that we will celebrate the night before Thanksgiving with our ecumenical Thanksgiving liturgy at the Assembly of God across the street.

Today in thinking about the Reformation and thinking about the unity of the Church this window above the altar is of the night Jesus was betrayed and you know the prayer he's saying at that rock: that the Church might be one, not that the Church might be churches. There are challenges to that. There's a certain amount of history that goes along with that. There is a certain amount of integrity. There are questions that are asked about how the Church works toward being one. There are growing opportunities between and among denominations to recognize each other's ministries and priesthoods, and we can give thanks for that.

We have to understand how deeply rooted the invitation to see things differently is because I think the lesson from the gospel today tells us a fascinating and to some degree sad story when we encounter Zacchaeus. Any former Sunday School people or church camp people? "*Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.*" And then Jesus, of course, says, "*Come down.*" The text says Jesus says to him, "*Come down quickly.*" Jesus is in a hurry to visit with this man who is small.

Have you ever felt small? Have you ever been made to feel small? Have you ever been up a tree? So we are finding ways in which we can identify with Zacchaeus. Even if we're tall people, sometimes we're made to feel small. Sometimes we are up a tree, like a treed animal. A bear gets chased and scared and runs up a tree. Sometimes we're living in the canopy of the trees, like our ancestors the apes live in treetops.

But Jesus sees Zacchaeus who is criticized for being two things in the gospel today. One is that he is rich and the other is that he is a tax collector which may be the means by which he got rich. And being rich apparently isn't such a good thing. May I pause to remind ourselves who gather in this place that in terms of the world - I don't care how you see yourself or how small you may imagine yourself to be - all of us, even the poorest among us, are the wealthiest people in the world. And sometimes if we get around to an honest confession about ourselves and who we are and how we act and how we live, we sometimes are very small as well, aren't we. How much time do you take to figure that tip when you go out to dinner? *[laughter]* Get it? We are often cheap, small and up a tree.

But there are some things about Zacchaeus that are worth paying attention to. He's curious about Jesus. Apparently he believes Jesus either has something to show him or say to him that is worth climbing a tree to see and hear. He's interested in the draw, the public attention that Jesus has, and when it becomes private not only is he shocked, but so are his righteous and religious friends because they know that he is a crook. They know that he gets his money dishonestly. They know that he is, in fact, sociologically *a little man*. And they know he's up a tree for a good reason.

But Jesus says to him, not just *"Come down,"* but *"Come down quickly because I wish to go to your house today."* Now that upsets the people who are obsessive-compulsive housekeepers against the possibility that God just might come and pay *them* a visit. The laundry is always done, the underwear is always in the drawer, the beds are always made, the kitchen floor is always clean - just in case the Queen of England or God Almighty might show up at the door. And here it happens to Zacchaeus and Jesus goes home with *him!*

Now that's essentially all there is to this story. There's not much record here about what Jesus says. Just *"Come down for I must stay at your house today."* So Jesus goes to his house, and then Zacchaeus says to Jesus, *"Half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded...(Now come on - "if" - Well, you've got to be provided with a little bit of cover)...if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay it back four times."* That's without Jesus having said a word to him. He is moved by the presence of the Savior in his house. Jesus says something to him afterwards. He says, *"Today salvation has come to this house. You, too, are like a son of Abraham. You believe, trust in and love God for the son of Man came to seek out and to save, not the righteous, but the lost."*

Well, what was the reaction of the righteous? They were ticked off. They had done all the hard work, they never missed church, they always tithed, they never ate pork, they mutilated their baby boys eight days after they were born, they washed their pots the right way. They did everything possible to obey the laws and commands of God, and they knew that God loved them better than everybody else in the world. They were righteous. They were saved. They were sons and daughters of God and Israel, and the rest of the people in the world were less, not chosen, small, up trees, without God. And so Jesus, who represents God present, is walking down the street followed by a crowd of people who know he has something to say, and what does he say? *"I want to go to the crook's house for lunch."* They were furious, absolutely furious!

Well, it's a simple story, and my question is will the world know that the Lord has called us out of our trees, that the Lord has asked us to see ourselves as something other than small or demeaned or useless or all the categories we use to exclude each other, and worthy of God's personal visit to our personal domiciles.

Every time we gather in this place on a Sunday it is sometimes said that we go to the House of the Lord. That's all backward and cockamamie. We come here because we are up a tree. We come here because we have been diminished. We see ourselves as small and de-valued. And some of our friends see us as rich and participating in their mess and cooperating with the systems as the tax collectors in society who feel that

cheating each other is a good way to treat each other, and he who dies with the most toys wins. We come here because we have been called to come quickly out of our trees to meet the Lord here who comes to live in our houses or our temples. Yea verily, friends, in our bodies which are the temple, the house of the Lord. We come here to open our ears to let God in through the Word.

I've told you about this before: There's a lovely painting in the Cloisters Museum which is the medieval collection of the Metropolitan Museum in New York, Upper West Side. It's a triptych of the annunciation, a northern Renaissance painting. Mary is sitting in front of a fireplace which is cold and across the mouth of which a bench has been placed. But she's sitting on the floor in her humility and being prepared to shut down the mouth and cool the memory of burning hell because she is going to receive into her body the gift of Jesus who will occupy the throne. And the way Jesus is getting into her is in that room are two small round windows painted high on the wall, sometimes referred to as "*the eyes of God.*" From the eyes of God coming toward Mary is a tiny little baby with a tiny little cross over his shoulder, and he's flying right into her ear. Yep, you got it. She has an open book, she's reading the Word of God, she's hearing the Word of God, and she's becoming pregnant with the Word of God. The Word becomes flesh and lives among us, in us.

And so it is we are called out of our trees to this place in the sacrament and in this liturgy to allow God to be domiciled in us, to allow God to live in us - audibly, visibly, biologically, spiritually, all of the ways you can imagine, to iterate and reiterate that spiritual reality that God can in fact visit the home of a crook, a mobster, a wealthy insensitive sinful human being and doesn't say a word, does not say a word. He *was* the Word. He didn't have to say a word. But all of Zacchaeus' friends are ticked off. Why? Because when Jesus goes home with Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus is affected to the point that he behaves differently toward everybody else. They no longer have a partner in their crime. Zacchaeus all of a sudden starts to care about the people, the poor who you always have with you. Jesus doesn't say solve the problem of poverty - although that's not a bad idea and we could do more about that and we don't. Jesus reminds us that there are always poor people there, and the way people knew that Jesus had visited Zacchaeus was that Zacchaeus started to treat poor people differently. They were not people to be taken advantage of, run over, ignored and further exploited, but they were people to be loved, helped, served, encouraged and shared with. That didn't fit the program of Zacchaeus' righteous friends. They were angry. But the world knew because of Zacchaeus' different treatment of the poor and those he cheated to whom he made reparation. Imagine that! Four times over! The world knew that Jesus had visited his house.

Now the question is: Is the world going to know that Jesus has visited *our* house? Is the world going to know that we have been called out of a tree quickly to give the Lord an opportunity to visit us in our place, that the Lord asks to be domiciled in this temple of our body and our corporate body together so that we might see and understand the rest of the world differently and not stand in the position of righteousness or holier-than-thou or better than or chosen by or superior to, but as brothers and sisters of the same loving Creator God.

That was a huge change of idea - religious theological idea - for Zacchaeus and for his friends, but Jesus' visit is what changed Zacchaeus' belief and his behavior, and after that visit then Jesus says, "*Salvation has come to this house.*" Will the world know that salvation comes to this house every day? Will we allow salvation to come to our house every day even though it might cost us our dearest friends?

Years ago in my first parish which was an immigrant parish... You've heard these stories before, but they're worth repeating. The very first year I was there the congregation, that was still worshipping in German after a hundred plus years, decided to stay in the neighborhood that was 90 plus percent Hispanic and to minister there. And I said to them, "*How are you going to do that?*" And they said, "*You are going to learn*

*Spanish.*” I was too young and too inexperienced to say, “*How do you expect me to do that?*” so I said, “*Well, Ok.*” And so they sent me to Mexico that very first year I was ordained to start to study Spanish. Over the years - and it took a long time - it took ten years really. Over the years there was a woman from Bulgaria who had lived 46 years in Argentina who emigrated to the United States and was able to purchase a house in the Bronx, who at that point was living in Weehawken as a parish worker in the Lutheran Church there. You know Weehawken, don’t you? Very important in the history of the United States. It’s where Burr and Hamilton had their duel. Dueling was illegal on Manhattan Island so they rode a boat across the Hudson and did their dueling in New Jersey. Weehawken is where that occurred. Marka Urban de Johannis was a parish worker at Good Shepherd in Weehawken, and she used to belly me into corners late at night, just stand there and rattle off Spanish to me until twelve or one o’clock in the morning. I didn’t know what in the world she was saying, but she knew that was the way to get it.

The point of this whole story is to say that I will never forget as long as I live her saying to me one time completely out of the blue, “*You know that by learning this language you’re not going to make more friends.*” She understood Zacchaeus’ friends. She understood righteous indignation about tolerating a visit from the Savior and doing the work of loving and serving the poor who we always have with us. She knew that would be a problem, and here it is in scripture. And so the question is are we willing to come out of our trees? Are we willing to run the risk of a visitation by God’s self in the person of Jesus? And will the world know by how we live and act and treat each other that we have indeed been visited by God?

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.