

Proper 26 Year C

“...so he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.”

It has been a while since I have climbed a tree...a long while....I've tried to remember the last time....I remember climbing a tree in college to get mistletoe for our fraternity Christmas party...there was always a mad dash to stand under the hanging mistletoe when Theresa Sanderson walked by...I remember climbing the pine tree just behind our house to begin construction on our tree house....the wood planks we collected from the scrap pile at the next door construction site....the oozing yellow sap from around the nail holes in the branches my brothers and I had hammered...I remember you could see from the top floor of the tree house all the way past the vacant field and new subdivision...all the way to my grandmother's house....we played Swiss Family Robinson with the neighborhood kids for hours during the summer.... Some days our tree house would become a ship and we would sail to exotic places around the world....usually encountering pirates...some days it was a fort to hold off Santa Ana's army or wild Indians...but what I remember most about climbing trees... was that immediate change in perspective....no sooner had I climbed a few feet, that the world looked different...everything familiar looked new and strange....a mysterious new view of my world.

Later, while in college Dr. Edward McCrady, then the Dean Emeritus, and retired professor of Biology, musician, athlete, poet...he quite the renaissance man...Dr. McCrady had some of us students who were friends of his grandchildren...also students...over to eat supper at his house over looking the valley a thousand feet below, the horizon sprawling at sunset... after supper he with great erudition explained to us about this mystery of perspective....now I can't remember the formula...but I remember there was a formula...I'm glad Frances Rouse isn't here to call me out....but the formula was something like this....that for every foot in elevation, one's sight line to the horizon extended a thousand feet....As a child, climbing trees, or in an airplane, I knew what he said was true...I had seen it with my own eyes.

Our gospel reading today is a story about perspective....this a famous story about which songs and poems have been written...Zacchaeus climbing the Sycamore tree to get a clear view of Jesus....now we are told that he is the chief tax collector and that he is rich...we just read a story about a tax collector last week in the previous passage...so Luke is zeroing in here.... the repentant tax collector an archetype.

So let's remind ourselves here again about the literary genre of this Gospel text and the other Gospels for that matter as well...this is not historical narrative...this story in particular only appears in Luke...the other Gospel writers don't include it...so this isn't a narrative that tells historically how things happened...these are narratives that teach a theology... theology... what God is like...God's place in the world...and our place in the world in relationship with God...these are imaginative pieces of literature that give us perspective on who God is manifest in Jesus Christ... AND the ones who follow after him...so when Jesus calms the seas, for example, we are being told a creation story...the power of God yet again moving over the face of the deep, creating, recreating the world and we in it...ordering yet again the primeval chaos...the disciples on their way to Emmaus, another story peculiar to Luke... on their way the disciples don't recognize the risen Christ until they are hosted at a meal...that's theology... God is known in our mealtaking...amid hospitality and sacrifice...Luke has Jesus as a child reading from Isaiah...connecting this Jesus movement all the way back to the resettlement of Israel in Judea come home from Babylon... Isaiah exhorting Israel not to forget the least among them on their way home...The same thing happening here with Jesus...that this way is the same as the old way...the way home...that to take care of the least among us is what makes an entire people whole and strong.

So what of our story today...if heard in the context of theology... remembering the road we've been on with Luke...this whole reversal of fortune thing...he hasn't been all that nice to the rich in his narrative...and this story reads like a reversal of fortune story too...but in this case Luke treats Zacchaeus different from the other rich rogues he's told us about...We know Zacchaeus is a reviled tax collector, and that he's rich because of it...but there is something more...he has a passion, a whetted imagination to see who this Jesus is...so much so that he sheds his finery and climbs the sycamore, because he couldn't see above the crowds...because he was short Luke says...that's endearing...Luke wants us to like this character...and wants us to learn from him...and of course the story sharpens...Zacchaeus does see Jesus...makes eye contact... The blind who begins to see motif again...again a theological proposition...and what Zacchaeus sees is that the heart of this Jesus movement is... God's justice...upon seeing Jesus and being asked to play host, he sees that his riches also belong to the poor...that his wealth and power are implicated in the social structure, exponentially... that his social stature doesn't exempt him from the plight of the least...that wherever there is injustice then reparations must be made...that the well being of his community, his people depend upon it...he sees from this

heightened perspective that the vocation we are in is to distribute, redistribute, as it were, the very Will of God... That's an apt definition of justice...justice, the gracious distribution of God's Will...and indeed Zacchaeus hears Jesus' affirmation that just as Jesus' vocation is to seek and save the lost...so too is his own vocation...he too to seek and save the lost...Zacchaeus driven by his passion for life...which all of us have... climbed the tree for a new perspective...the horizon now broadening exponentially for him, we've heard the formula...and he now knows what shape the rest of his life has...he has seen the mystery stretching towards the horizon...the beauty of it.

This of course is the ongoing story of repentance for Luke; this life of turning toward the good...Zacchaeus a protagonist for the community itself...all the gospels concerned first and foremost with the common life of the faithful...so Zacchaeus here is the community...and more broadly the people of Israel...Luke is calling the community to account; to take a look from a new perspective...take the blinders off and see the living Christ...the one who calls us into fellowship, relationship...so that stronger together we can feed and heal and clothe and dignify and save...God's very compassion set loose...that is what the son of man does...we also sons and daughters whose job one is to seek out and save the lost...a repentance brought on by perspective...repentance not a chalky bitter pill to swallow but a sumptuous and joyous feast brought on by our very passions for life...our God given desire to see the world the way God sees it...Imagine.

This is the last stop for this band of disciples before they arrive in Jerusalem...bearing a perspective and a theology and a passion that will not be received amid the seats of power...the seats of power will seek to destroy such a world view...but this view, this world view that Zacchaeus sees in the way of Jesus is the way God's commonweal begins in earth...and it happens in spite of us and because of us...but it is about us, sons and daughters of humanity, climbing the tree and seeing for ourselves the world as new...the broadening horizon, God's view of the world that God calls good...and then for us to hurry down because time is short...for us to hurry down and join the feast of the world's redemption...the world's redemption...God's Will abundantly distributed for all in earth.