

24th Sunday after Pentecost - 30 October, 2016
Sermon preached by the Rev. Daniel Vélez Rivera
Lessons: Isaiah 1:10-18, Psalm 32:1-8, 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12, Luke 19:1-10

Imagine having the chance to ask Jesus this question, “Rabbi Jesus, what does a day in the life of Jesus Christ look like? I imagine him saying, “take a seat and let me tell you what happened just yesterday as I was passing through this little town, Jericho, about 15 miles’ northeast of Jerusalem, where my Palestinian brothers and sisters live.”

Today’s gospel lesson is about one of my favorite biblical characters, Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector who lived in one of the oldest if not the oldest town in the world, Jericho. Jericho was the town where the Israelites returned to when they came back from captivity in Egypt; it is an oasis town, fed by the waters that come down from the surrounding mountains to the east of it and because of that it is one of the most fertile lands in the area where date palms and grapes are harvested and one of the principal commercial centers as well. An interesting historic anecdote of the town where Zacchaeus lived is that it has been continuously inhabited for at least nine thousand years.

Jericho is mentioned two times in the Gospels: it was where Bartimaeus a blind beggar sitting by the roadside realized by the commotion and comments of the people around him that Jesus was passing by and he cried out for Jesus to heal his blindness. The second Jericho story was today’s lesson about the tax collector Zacchaeus who worked for the Roman government as chief tax collector, a position that made him one of the bad guys in the community. In a similar manner to the blind man Bartimaeus, Zacchaeus finds out that the infamous teacher, Jesus is passing through, and he wants a glimpse, but he was too short so he climbs a tree as quickly as possible before the rabbi moves on. I love the way Luke describes this person, a stubby little guy whose curiosity was greater than his stature. It reminds me of some folks in my homeland when a famous performer comes to one of those towns with outdoor stadiums in Puerto Rico and you see people climbing the palm trees or fences to catch a glimpse of Shakira or Mark Anthony’s performance, a show they would could not otherwise afford to see.

Have you ever been in a situation where by fervor or simple curiosity you did the impossible to witness with your own eyes or ears whatever was necessary to come close to someone famous? Or, have you ever been at an airport and suddenly your favorite sports person or movie star walks by? That’s how I imagine it was for Zacchaeus when Jesus passed through. That happened to me once, I was with my best

friend, Ema, and we were standing at a stop light in the middle of Harvard Square in Cambridge, MA where Harvard University is located, and suddenly several big black SUV's swooshed by. We stood there along with hundreds more and suddenly if felt as if time paused, there we were gazing into the eyes of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, who, it seemed, looked at us both, smiled and blessed us with that gracious blessing of namaskar. I'm not a Buddhist, but I felt that blessing in my soul, it filled us both with a giddy joy and maybe even fueled both our souls. I've never forgotten that moment some fifteen years ago or so which is not part of my spiritual journey.

That blessing and so many more that come into our lives is how Jesus calls one by name, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house." That call is how Jesus invites us to pause and listen for whatever it is our souls might need – His presence, mercy, grace, compassion, forgiveness, and above all love of our Savior, Jesus. Jesus needs no invitation to introduce himself into our lives in the same way that the Dalai Lama inserted himself into mine on that corner of Harvard Square. Our Lord invites us to pause and in that fleeting moment we can be transformed as Zacchaeus was transformed. With that presence of Christ, we are touched; our homes and those who inhabit it are also touched by the grace and mercy of the Spirit of God in Christ that heals, forgives and saves us.

I can only imagine that Zacchaeus might have felt lighter on his feet, radiant in the presence of Christ, saying crazy things like, "Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." In other words, "your acknowledgement of me Lord, and your presence before me, have healed me, sinner that I am - I am sorry". Zacchaeus wasn't more a follower of Jesus than I am a follower of the most merciful Buddha, but after the encounter he found a home in Christ Jesus. As the prophet Isaiah said, we will learn to do good and "our sins which are like scarlet become like snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool." We will learn to practice inclusion and to love our neighbor better, we will be filled with righteousness and take on the fight for justice and peace, blessing our enemies instead of cursing them. With the presence of Christ in our hearts we take on his eyes and ears, and become his hands and feet.

As you leave this holy place this morning I invite you to take on the curiosity of Zacchaeus; say yes to the Christ who invites himself into your life, into your home, and who wants to sit at your table, and bless you so that you may be filled with his Spirit, and invite the curious to join Him. Amen.