

THE MESSAGE

Luke 19:1-10

Befriending

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Question: What difference does Jesus make in your life? I invite you to ponder that question with me here this morning. What difference does Jesus make in your life? For me he makes all the difference.

There was a Buddhist, a Muslim and a Christian standing outside a temple in Indonesia having a conversation about religion. The Christian is listening as the other two discuss how they both believe all religions are fundamentally the same – teaching morals and values and how to live together in community. “We have different views about small issues,” one of them said, “but when it comes down to essential issues, each religion is the same.” The Christian said, “It sounds as if you both picture God (or whatever you call god) at the top of a mountain. You seem to believe that we are at the bottom of the mountain, and I can take one route up the mountain and you take another and in the end we all end up at the same place. The other two smiled and replied, “Exactly! You understand.” Then the Christian says, “What if God at the top of the mountain actually comes down here to where we are? What would you think if I told you that God doesn’t wait for people to find their way up to him but instead he comes down to us?” They thought for a moment and said, “That would be great.” The Christian replied, “Let me introduce you to Jesus.” (From the book “Radical,” by David Platt page 33)

Jesus does for us what we cannot do for ourselves. He came into this world to seek out and save the lost by sharing God’s love, dying on a cross, living again, leading the way for us to follow him in life and in death. Jesus puts us in a right relationship with God, something we cannot do on our own. Without Jesus we are hopeless and helpless like sheep gone astray on that mountain side.

Now if were to ask you what’s the Good News we share? You would probably say something like, “God loves me.” Or that “God loves me enough to send Jesus to die for me and pay for the penalties of my sins and offer life everlasting in God’s glorious kingdom.” And you’d be right.

But there’s more. With Jesus there is always more. The Bible tells us that we are blessed by God to be a blessing to others. Say that with me – *we are blessed by God to be a blessing to others*. God chose the church to be a living vehicle to carry his loving presence into the world. We are to be God’s love in the world as we talked about last week.

This may come as a shock to you as it did to me but we are not the object of God’s love, the world is. John’s gospel verse 3:16 reads, “for God so loved the world that he gave his Son.” I have yet to find a Bible translation of John 3:16 that reads, “for God so loved the church that he gave his Son.”

This may come as another shock to you too as it did to me. The truth is – God has an ulterior motive for loving us and blessing us. It's not for us. We are not the end; we are the means for sharing God's love and grace and mercy and forgiveness in the world.

Now before you start sending emails to the bishop. Before you stage some protest outside asking for my resignation, just bear with me for a minute. Picture God at the center of the universe and everything revolving around God, everything existing for God's glory, everything pointing to God's glory, everything worshiping God, everything in a right relationship with God.

The Bible tells us that God has a passion to be in a right relationship with you and me and everyone and everything throughout the world – throughout the universe. That means everyone and everything exists for God. God longs to be in a right relationship with us.

Unfortunately sin prevents us from doing so. We put ourselves in the place of God. There is something inside us driving us to put ourselves at the center of our own universe. We all do it, some of us are just better at it than others. Sin causes us to worship created things instead of the Creator. Sin causes us to focus on ourselves and what we want and not on God and what God wants.

That's why we have the confession during worship to remind us of our need for Jesus. We all are like sheep who have gone astray. He makes our relationship with the Creator possible. He restores our relation with God and calls us to live for him and his ways. Without Jesus we are nothing, simply the dirt of the earth. With Jesus we are everything, the pinnacle of God's creation called for a special purpose in the world.

As I read the New Testament I notice that Jesus makes three promises to those who follow him. Jesus says:

1. Follow me and I will make your life better – not simpler not richer but better.
2. Follow me and I will care about you – like no one else.
3. Follow me and I will take you to where you cannot go on your own.

These three promises get played out in our reading today. And they bring about a friendship with Jesus that transforms Zacchaeus' life.

Zacchaeus was not a religious person. He's the kind of guy you would never see in worship or involved in a church in anyway, shape or form. And yet, his eyes and ears were open to Jesus and the message of life he offered, in contrast to the spiritual blindness and deafness of the so called "religious" people.

Zacchaeus, whose name means "pure and innocent," might long to be made pure and innocent. He wasn't. Dishonesty had become a way of life for him. Zacchaeus was a real schmuck – there is no other way to put it.

Known for corruption, he worked for the Roman government. And he was good at it, collecting taxes from his friends and family, using whatever means he could. As a chief tax collector, he was at the very top of the tax collecting pyramid, taking from those beneath him who were also in the business of ripping off people. Zacchaeus was one bad dude.

He heard about this guy named Jesus and with nothing better to do that day he went to check out Jesus for himself. We're told that Zacchaeus was short and couldn't see over the crowds. Can you picture this middle age guy? Not in the best of shape. He ran ahead and climbs a sycamore tree to get a glimpse of this Jesus guy that people were flocking to see. And there he sits waiting for Jesus. And along comes Jesus, picture that crowd all around him, this buzz just following him.

When Jesus gets to the tree where Zacchaeus is Jesus stops and calls out to him. Somehow Jesus knows this man in the tree. And a life-changing relationship begins. Imagine what's going on in Zacchaeus' mind at that moment. He might be thinking, "You know my name! He knows my name! How does he know me?" Jesus calls out to him, "Zacchaeus, I want to come to your house today. I want to spend time with you. I want to get to know you better. I want to make your life better. I care about you."

Jesus initiates the relationship out of the blue and out of the tree Jesus calls to Zacchaeus. Not the other way around. There's nothing but the grace of God at work here. Zacchaeus doesn't have to clean up his act. He doesn't have to learn the lingo. He doesn't have to come to church. He doesn't have to be confirmed. He doesn't have to change anything before Jesus invites him into a relationship. He doesn't have to measure up, or make excuse, or be a model citizen before Jesus says, "Zacchaeus, come on down, we're going to your house today!"

It reminds me of "The Price is Right" when people in the audience hear their name called. And the excitement of the crowd goes wild for that person breaking out in super support. No matter whose name is called out the cheering and the shouting and the clapping is just as enthusiastic.

But not for Zacchaeus the people respond in a different way when his name is called. They respond with judgment and jaws wide open. No excitement. No clapping. No cheering. Instead they ask, "What that... what is Jesus doing with Zacchaeus?" "Nobody wants to be with Zaccchaeus." "He's a sinner, not a winner!" "He's a bad man!" "He's got a lot of problems!" "He's bad news." "Stay away from him."

The religious leaders, the faithful church goers, and even the pastors, were muttering about the scandal of Jesus choosing to be the guest of a sinner. It's as if they were afraid that somehow Zacchaeus' badness might rub off on to Jesus' goodness. But it's the other way around.

Zacchaeus becomes a whole new person with a whole new purpose. Something powerful happens when he meets Jesus. He has a change of heart. He's not been a happy guy. His life is empty, nobody likes him- he's hurt people, robbed people, coerced people, betrayed people, cheated people, stolen from people.

For the first time in his life Zacchaeus hears a simple message of care and concern as Jesus befriended him. No one has ever done that before. "Zacchaeus come on down, I want to be with you," Jesus says. "I care about you." "You've got a friend in me." Jesus is saying.

This story points out that even a guy like Zacchaeus was not beyond the grace, and love, and mercy, and forgiveness of God. The crowd writes Zacchaeus off, but Jesus doesn't. No one is a write-off to Jesus.

Even before they head off for lunch notice the change of heart in Zacchaeus. He makes a public declaration of what is going on in his heart. He "confesses" a desire to be a different person, all because of his relationship with Jesus. He announces that he will give half of his possessions away to the poor. And repay four-times anyone he has wronged through his devious business dealings, which was far beyond what the law required him to do. He is willing to right the wrongs and make a difference in people lives all because Jesus befriended him.

Zacchaeus gave 50% away – can you imagine being so moved by Jesus that you would give 50% of your assets away? It's not about the amount of money though it's about what's going on in our hearts. Zacchaeus came to see that it's not about stuff. It's about people. It's about loving others as he realized God loved him in Christ Jesus.

Because of his encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus' life was forever changed and it showed.

Question: What difference does Jesus make in your life? Amen