

Left on the Margin

Wayne Waibel – 10/30/2022

The thing I try to do with each sermon is find something in the lectionary that reveals itself in the periphery. I've always favored those discoveries that manifest out of the corner of your eye. I suppose it's akin to the road less traveled. Scripture is so rich with imagery and wisdom. It's a challenge to seek out and find the un-ordinary in that mix.

The story of Zacchaeus is one such passage. There is a lot going on all around the story, but the thing that caught my attention was the crowd. In the King James Version of the Bible it says, "They all murmured." The New American Standard reads, "They all began to grumble." The New International version says, "All the people saw this and began to mutter." And the Amplified text states, "They all muttered among themselves and indignantly complained." Clearly – Zacchaeus was not well liked.

The various translations hold one common thread, the people of Jesus' day had no difficulty at all being vindictive and judgmental. It's no wonder Jesus was so confounding to the Jewish elite and Roman oppressors alike. He embodied an entirely revolutionary track of ministry. Devotion to those left on the margin.

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Zacchaeus epitomized a marginalized segment of early Jewish society that doesn't get a lot of ink. He was a tiny little man – in itself, a small matter really. See what I did there?

More importantly, he was a chief tax collector, which made him the most heinous of all the tax collectors as he was definitely in collusion with the Roman empire and had undoubtedly impacted just about everyone in the crowd adversely at some point in their lives.

Add to that his massive wealth and you have the reason why the crowd muttered, murmured, grumbled, and indignantly complained about Christ inviting Himself to this guy's house to spend the night.

What these folks were about to learn was that God's grace is most effective when we have finished our protest and outrage - and grow silent. Crowds feed off each other so when someone starts muttering, you can be sure someone else is going to elevate that to a murmur, which will in turn foster a grumble and before you know it - you're hurtling headlong into a complaint.

That can very truly be the dynamic of a crowd. But when the indignation ceases – the resultant calm can bring about a peace. It's not always easy to get there, but Jesus is particularly skilled at just this sort of interplay.

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How often do we see the same scenario even today? Black Lives Matter, the Me-Too Movement, Gay Rights, Immigration Reform, Roe v. Wade: our headlines reflect a consciousness that ebbs and flows continually with crowds from one cause or another and their responding opponents as well.

All of this noise makes it impossible to reach the kind of silence required to achieve a peace and a reckoning, because none of us has the capacity to work a crowd like Jesus.

We are left to our own devices, which generally means, abject failure is the result. Our own instincts and needs are not trustworthy guides. If we want to follow God's plan, we must first give up our own. And Jesus makes it very simple for us. All we have to do is love each other and God. How hard is that?

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If you parse out the original Greek in this story, the tense could easily translate to Zacchaeus having already given half his wealth to the poor and returning fourfold to all whom he previously defrauded. So his statement to Jesus may have been a confession of transgressions justified – not an intent to make amends.

The little guy was definitely fitting into the onus of Christ's attention to those left on the margin. That is probably the overriding theme of this story. God's grace is freely given. It's not something we earn or really even deserve, and yet, here we are. It should be very comforting to know that our salvation is not contingent on our efforts.

Those who view life as a journey, almost always acknowledge that God is their companion along the way. And that is precisely what Zacchaeus was coming to figure out - but what of the crowd?

Their solace was in the Master's Words: "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost." In this view of the reading, Christ's defense of Zacchaeus in that he is a "Son of Abraham" puts him within the faith – not outside.

This then would make the judgmental crowd the natural foil to Zacchaeus, who was perfectly illustrating Christ's approach to the theme of generosity and salvation. God designed wealth to be shared.

Once again, Luke is providing us an alternative to expectations. The crowd, and its accepted sentiments are overturned and those who seem to be outside the faith become those whom God accepts. It's a stunning role reversal.

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We don't have a lot to work with these days when it comes to attaining a peace and harmony where crowds are gathered. There's too much yelling going on for the voices of reason to be heard. Everyone seems to be disproportionately concerned with what they have to say, rendering it nearly impossible to have regard for another view. Particularly when that view is in conflict with their own.

So we side with like-minded people – gather up our picket signs and hit the streets. It's too bad that more media coverage is not afforded the animated gathering of widely diverse folks enthusiastically finding joy – much like Zacchaeus in the offering of one's wealth whether that is goods or services.

Were Zacchaeus to drop into our midst from his perch in a sycamore tree he would find a lot less grumbling and lot more support for his redemptive ways. Because this crowd is quick to listen and slow to anger.

This crowd allows the expression of each to be heard - and even acted upon, lending credence to the notion that actions can result in consequences that have an eternal significance.

This crowd embodies what it's like to live in a land of freedom and bravery and charity and love for one another and our most merciful God, to say nothing of His remarkable Son, who seeks and saves those who are lost. Most especially those left on the margin. Amen.