

Out on a limb

A sermon by the Reverend Robert Bruce Edson in Emmanuel Episcopal Church, West Roxbury, Massachusetts, on the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost, October 30, 2016.

...the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost. Luke 19:10

As we grow up, some develop physically sooner than others. I grew up to my full height at an early age and was among the taller boys in school, taller than I am now. Years later, when I was a student in the Theological School over in Cambridge, one of my classmates and I had blind dates arranged for us. He was a good bit shorter than me so we decided ahead of time that I would escort the taller of the two young women who were to arrive from Smith College. When they arrived, much to our astonishment, the taller one of the two stood three or four inches taller than me. After getting over our mutual awkwardness, we made the best of the situation.

In our gospel story today Zacchaeus is a short man, but that isn't his worst problem. He is a tax collector with whom devout Jews carefully avoided any contact because of their disreputable character. As chief tax collector in the city of Jericho, Zacchaeus is notorious for participating in a common practice among tax collectors to keep a portion of what is collected for himself. Zacchaeus goes along with the scheme but isn't proud of it. He doesn't like what he is doing and doesn't feel right about it. He derives no pleasure from his ill begotten gains. When he hears that Jesus is coming to town, he is curious and wants to get a glimpse of the man preaching a message of hope.

When Jesus arrives in Jericho, Zacchaeus can't see over the heads of the crowd in front of him, so he climbs up in a sycamore tree to get a better view. As Jesus passes by he looks up and sees Zacchaeus in the tree and tells him to come down because he is going visit him at his home. Zacchaeus is stunned. How does this man know his name or anything about him? He certainly never expected to have him as a guest in his home. Imagine the reaction when gets home and says, "Guess who's coming to dinner?"

Jesus is known for associating with disreputable people and is widely criticized for it. He welcomes and embraces outcasts because he is the one they need. He did not come to save the righteous, but those who are lost. If Jesus welcomes the most notorious of sinners, he surely welcomes the likes of us. Regardless of condition, all are welcome here at the altar to be nourished and strengthened in this sacred meal we call the Eucharist. None of us is blameless. We are all in need of God's grace and mercy. To be sure, Jesus does not condone illegal or immoral behavior. He accepts us as we are and expects us work on being better people by fulfilling our potential. The church is not a club for saints, but a hospital for sinners.

When Jesus reaches out to a person of a tax collector's reputation to include him in rather than shutting him out, we can imagine that it didn't go over well with people. It was considered improper for a rabbi to associate with open and notorious sinners, but Jesus knows that Zacchaeus is serious about his repentance. He knows that he is not only up a tree; he is out on a limb. To make good on his repentance, Zacchaeus not only promises to give away half his possessions, he will repay more than what is due to those whom he cheated. He is serious about making amends for his old ways. He would have continued to be hated by his townspeople until Jesus comes along to change his life.

It is one thing to invite Jesus into our life and entirely another thing for Jesus to invite himself into our life. Redemption is what happens when we come to terms with who we really are. It is what happens when we are forced to get serious about making the necessary changes to our lifestyle. Once we have committed to making those changes, we are never again the same.

Now is the time to commit to being a better person, a better spouse and partner, a better parent and child. There is no time like the present to get serious about being better students and teachers, better employees or employers. We don't have to go on being the same person we've always been. We are all capable of changing our behavior. It is never too late and we are never too old.

You may be thinking that you aren't such a notorious sinner like Zacchaeus and that is most likely true. You may not hate yourself, but there may be aspects of your life that you don't like and want to change. Perhaps no one else knows what that is, but you know it and God knows it. It is between you and God and it is with God's help that you can change. In time, people will notice something different about you. They will notice that something has changed for the better. It may be that you are being more patient, that you listen and respond better and that you are more sensitive to the feelings of others. They will notice that you are interested in what they have to say rather than having to say what you think. Whatever the necessary changes, if they are important enough to you, they are important enough to ask God to help.

Tomorrow is Halloween or All Hallows Eve, the eve of All Saints' Day. It is a time when children have fun dressing up in costumes and wearing masks. As adults in Christ, we can't hide behind a mask. We can't pretend to be someone we're not. Christ helps us to take off those masks and be the people God intends us to be. God accepts us as we are and is never finished with us.

When we allow Christ to be invited into our lives it is the ultimate in hospitality. Just as we would try to keep our home as clean and neat and orderly as possible for an unexpected guest, we commit ourselves to keeping our lives in the same way. That requires the effort at being disciplined in keeping our act together.

Right now you may be thinking how you left your home this morning. Was everything clean and neat and put away or were there things that could have been straightened up? If you leave here and someone is coming to visit, will everything be presentable? The same is true with your own personal life. Were Jesus to pay an unexpected visit, would your life be in order? Would you be glad to have him know you as you are or would you have to make some changes that you have been putting off? Only you can answer that and it is never too late.