

New Perspective

October 30, 2022

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There's a comedian my husband listens to who tells a joke that one of the things he didn't realize when he got married and moved in with his partner was that when they asked which side of the bed he wanted it was going to be a life-long decision. That's true though, isn't it? For most couples, even if you buy a new house, you continue to sleep on the same side of the bed.

If you go to a hotel, same side. Go camping? Same side.

And it's not just couples. I distinctly remember that in the various apartments I had alone in my 20s, no matter how the room was set up, I slept on the same side of the bed.

Am I alone in this? I didn't think so. After decades of this, have you tried sleeping on the other side of the bed? It's disorienting. I don't remember why we swapped sides of the bed when we were on vacation recently, but it wasn't pretty. I didn't fall out or anything, but when I woke up, I had to come to full consciousness, not just stay in that typical foggy, half-awake state, to comprehend where I was. We get used to a certain perspective.

My best friend from seminary and I were talking about today's Gospel, the story of Zacchaeus recently. She relayed the story of studying it with a group of colleagues, and being frustrated when the group went on and on about how lonely and sad Zacchaeus was. She was frustrated, because that's just not in the text. Her colleagues were engaging in what Julie Harder names often in her class as "importing theology." That is, carrying into a scripture text ideas and interpretations that you've learned in different places, but that aren't necessarily there.

We do it all the time – imagining there are three magi in the Christmas story when really the text just names three gifts that they brought, mashing up the woman caught in adultery with Mary Magdalene, even though nowhere in the Bible does it ever tell us that Magdalene behaved in that way. (As a side note, this is a particular pet peeve of mine, as it stems from the early church fathers conflating many women in the Bible, not finding them to be of enough value as to even keep them straight.)

All of this is to say that, if we're being faithful to our Gospel text today, there are only a few things that we know about Zacchaeus. He's short. He's chief tax collector and he is rich. He makes a substantial effort to see Jesus.

There's nothing in the text about his mental or social status. We're not told whether he was an outsider. We're not told whether he had friends or family or was lonely. We're only told that the crowd grumbled when Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house.

If you've been following along throughout this summer and fall, you may remember me saying a few different times that one of the things that really strikes me this year as we read through the Gospel of Luke is how the "righteous" crowds around Jesus, both amidst the healing stories and amidst the parables, always seem to be left with the psycho-spiritual ailment that is the focus of

the healing. When Jesus heals the person who is paralyzed, the crowd seems to remain paralyzed in their way of thinking. When Jesus heals the person who is blind, the onlookers remain blind to the grace in their midst.

Let's carry that model forward with us into today's text, then. In today's story, Zacchaeus makes an effort to get a different perspective on Jesus, while all the crowd does is grumble. I'd like to suggest to you today that, at least part of the grace of this story, is being willing to expend some energy to get a new perspective, to see things in a different way. Per my initial metaphor – to change your side of the bed. If you can't see things clearly, if your perspective is unclear, do what you can to put yourself in a different point of view.

Applications

From time to time, people will talk with me about their fears of aging and not wanting to move out of their homes. Folks will come to me overburdened with issues around career and success and societal expectations.

I'll never forget a person at another church who met with me several times because the business they had started was stressing them out. It wasn't what they had expected it to be. The stress was causing substantial health problems. Their primary relationship was suffering. Yet, when I suggested they sell the business or walk away or do something new, the only thing they fixated on was that then they would be a failure. For the life of them, they couldn't access the perspective that doing something new and different and healthy could simply be the next chapter in their life, and rather continued looking through the eyes of failure.

Along with this story being an encouragement to expend some energy finding a new perspective if we're struggling to see clearly, something else strikes me about this passage this year: it's also an indictment of the crowd. I'd been planning to lift this up even before last night's tragic happenings in Seoul, in which more than 150 people were killed when a crowd got out of control and trampled them amidst Halloween celebrations. Crowds, both literal and figurative, can often become unruly and chaotic. Think of people's behaviors way back in the day when folks used to go to buffets, and just how selfish and single minded folks would become. Or the crush of folks trying to see a celebrity or buy the latest gadget or toy. People in crowds often feel anonymous, and therefore are willing to set aside some of their behaviors and values. Think of how much litter you see on the ground after a concert or sporting event.

And so, another perspective for contemplation in our Gospel passage today is that, had the crowd behaved differently, Zacchaeus may not have needed to climb the tree. We've all been to parades where the little kids were seated on the curb, folks in chairs were behind them, and still more people stood behind them. The crowd organized itself so that everyone could see.

But not the crowd around Jesus that day. Nope. They crowded around him, me first, and then grumbled when he chose to go to the home of someone who had behaved differently.

Conclusion

Friends, to circle back to my initial metaphor, I'm not suggesting that you change your side of the bed. C'mon, we're not animals! But I am suggesting that one of the divine facets of this

passage is the power of a new perspective, and in particular, expending the energy to find a way to see things differently. And furthermore, that we need to be conscious of the fact that the way we organize things when we're in groups is critical. It has the potential to literally include and exclude, which spiritually brings people nearer or farther from the kingdom of God.

We've got so much going on in the life of the church today: It's Reformation Sunday, as we remember that 405 years ago tomorrow, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral in one of the most symbolic events of the Protestant Reformation. Today's reflection on being willing to spend time and energy to gain new perspective dovetails nicely with Luther's teaching that the church needs to be "semper reformanda," that is, always reforming. We're holding our Heifer Living Gift Market after worship. This connects so well to the passage which Betty read for us from Isaiah (1:17) in which we are told that God is not impressed by our religious rituals, but rather wants us to, "learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow." AND, our church is still in the midst of our annual budget pledge drive, in which we ask our members and friends to prayerfully consider how they will financially support the ministry of this church in 2023, and to let us know their intentions.

Friends, I have to be honest, it would have felt manipulative if I had focused on Zacchaeus' generosity at the end of our Gospel lesson. I know that if I had focused on Zacchaeus' extreme generosity, most of your eyes would have glazed over, and probably more than a few hearts would have hardened. And those instincts would have been right. Because while keeping the lights on and paying our staff a living wage is critical infrastructure, all of those things serve the purpose of:

- helping people encounter Christ.
- helping people find the perspective, the vantage point, by which they can access God's transformation and healing and love.
- becoming a conduit for God's grace through all the amazing things you've lifted up on the Post-its to my left as we have processed Union's "why" this month.

I trust that this congregation will be abundantly generous because I trust that we passionately believe in the Good News of Great Joy that this church proclaims. And so my prayer this week is this: That when you're stuck, when you can't see the forest for the trees, you will remember Zacchaeus and find a way to gain some new perspective, and that in all of the different groups you are a part of, you will make efforts to help everyone to "see." When we do so, the reign of God will be even closer at hand.

May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen!

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Isaiah 1:11-18; Luke 19:1-10
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