



Sermon Preached By Rev. Bruce
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Luke 19:1-10

November 4, 2007

The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost

“Dinner with a Sinner”

He wanted to see “who Jesus was”, according to the story. He didn’t merely want to *see* Jesus; he wanted to see who he was. It suggests something more than idle curiosity. This is different from our 21st century phenomenon of the cult of celebrity, which tends to focus on what the star wore to the gala event, who they came with or more importantly for headlines, who they *left* with. This is mere gawking. In the cult of celebrity, nobody really wants to see who the person is, we just want to see how they *look*, what they are driving, and what kind of house they live in.

But Zaccheus was interested in what made Jesus tick. Jesus represented something so different than himself and this fascinated Zaccheus: whereas Zaccheus figured out how to profit from the Roman occupation and the Kingdom of Caesar, Jesus proclaimed a different kingdom that had nothing to do with financial security. (This is why Zaccheus acquired the label “sinner”, one who had been rendered religiously impure by handling Roman currency. His fellow Jews despised him because got “very rich” by gouging them when it came to collect taxes for Rome.) And Jesus wasn’t like the other religious leaders, who were quick to condemn “sinners” publicly. Zaccheus heard through the grape vine – the pilgrims that traveled the road from south from the Galilee, through Jericho, and then west to Jerusalem, that this Jesus ate with winners. What’s a holy man doing making himself into a sinner by association? Furthermore, as all these travelers passed through his tollbooth, he would overhear them talking about healing power of Jesus of Nazareth. People’s lives changed as they heard him tell parables about the Kingdom of God. Zaccheus didn’t merely want to see Jesus. He wanted to *encounter* him.

What’s going on? Zaccheus had made his decision long ago that we could put up with the shame and the shunning associated with the label sinner. He carefully weighed the costs and the benefits. His children had access to all privileges of Roman culture. Wasn’t the role of a good father to take care of his family? His wife enjoyed a few of the luxuries that her friends and family could only dream of – isn’t this the role of a good husband? His private collection of imported wines was growing nicely as well. In fact, he was looking forward to cracking a bottle that very evening. The glares, the snide comments, and the shunning from his own people, were acceptable, if painful, costs. So, why the intense interest in who Jesus was?

Built in to the fabric of our universe, at all levels – micro and macro, geological and biological, and in the human realm, morally and spiritually – there is a dynamic that mathematical physicist and cosmologist, Brian Swimme, calls *allurement*. He asks himself, why would hydrogen and helium get interested in each other? They were doing fine on their own, just hanging out in space after the Big Bang being hydrogen and helium. But these molecules found each other and when they did, an irrepressible

attraction emerged pulling them together. This is the power of communion, a fundamental dynamic of the universe. What this means is that communion is a standard feature of the universe: it comes equipped with communion. It was built-in, a first principle. When hydrogen and helium hooked up the lights get switched on in the universe. Galaxies emerge with their star-fields, born of this molecular attraction.

Or think of the planet earth before it came to life, maybe 3 billion years ago. It had been hanging around for a couple of billion years before this emergence of life. What was it doing? In Brian Swimme's imaginative language, earth was falling in love with the sun. It entered into a relationship of deep fascination. You see, the sun was a source of allurement for the earth. The heat and light radiating from it held the potential to awaken the earth to life. So, the earth just hangs out for a couple of billion years, apprehended by potential of this radiation to awaken it to life. One day, the earth would figure out how to convert the sun's light into energy, through the chlorophyll molecule and then it was game on!

While the dance of communion between hydrogen and helium, and the sun and the earth takes literally billions of years bear fruit, in the human realm we can light up much faster. I suspect this is what was going on within Zaccheus. Jesus was his sun. There was some alluring power within Jesus of Nazareth that he was being drawn into. The story says that he climbed a sycamore tree, being a short man, in order to get a glimpse of Jesus as he passed by. We're all short men and women when it comes to these sources of allurement. Zaccheus' ascent up that tree is allurement in action. There is a pull in the heart of the human being get ourselves to a higher place in anticipation of what is next in our life. What's next? Where am I going? What's the future that is calling me? Why this "blessed unrest", to use Martha Piper's phrase. The future is located in whatever, or whoever, is a source of allurement for us.

We're all tree-climbers, by birth. Unless we're spiritually dead, psychologically damaged, or emotionally frozen, we never stop peaking ahead for the future that is calling us. Think of this ascent up the tree as the desire to discover new perspectives from which to view our lives. We have this capacity to see our lives objectively. When someone like Jesus passes by our radar screen, our consciousness lights up. It causes us to step outside of our lives as we've known them, as see them through a broader lens. By becoming fascinated with Jesus, Zaccheus moved to another level of existence, a much broader perspective. So what he was seeing from his perch was not just Jesus, but his own life from the perspective of Jesus.

Recently, my wife Ann, has been inquiring whether or not she's going to have to listen to another poem by Hafiz in my sermons. He is an ancient Sufi mystic who is currently lighting me up. He is a source of allurement for me. Every morning, I climb a tree and sit down with one of his poems. This is because, Hafiz' perspective on life is in many ways more encompassing than mine. He is pulling me into an unformed future. He is expanding my spiritual perspective. Truly, I've never been without a source of allurement. In an evolutionary universe, there are always more trees to climb. The Holy One never stops passing by, for those with eyes to see.

I've called this sermon *Dinner with a Sinner*, because it's cute, or at least I thought so. But in truth, Jesus didn't look upon Zaccheus as a sinner. In fact, think about how vulnerable Zaccheus made himself. He put himself out there for the entire world to see. The fact that he was up the tree and not sitting at his tollbooth, counting his money, signaled that Zaccheus' was ready to grow – and Jesus knew it. At different stages of life, different things fascinate us. Zaccheus' fascination with money was loosening. This is clear, because at dinner that night, he tells Jesus that he's willing to repay anybody he's overcharged fourfold, and to give half of his wealth to the poor. This new capacity for divestment doesn't make him a saint, anymore than he was a sinner when he was clutching his money. It just means that the source of his fascination – what is now alluring to him – is shifting.

Zaccheus was caught up in the evolutionary thrust of the universe. Notice Jesus' words, after Zaccheus signals that the spiritual life Jesus offers is more compelling than the life project of making money: "Today, salvation has come to this house (Luke 19:9)." He doesn't say, "Today, I have saved this man from eternal damnation." The notion of salvation associated with traditional Christianity – Jesus dying for our sins, etc. – gets no support here. Before Jesus ever dies, before one drop of blood of his is ever shed, Jesus is declaring that salvation has come to the home of Zaccheus. In an evolutionary paradigm – one in which we grow and develop by trusting the dynamic of allurements – salvation must be reframed.

The universe is evolving in a biased direction. It is winding itself up towards increasing levels of complexity, consciousness and compassion. I know. Richard Dawkins and other hard scientists think this is ridiculous. To them, the universe is a completely random series of events that somehow resulted in the life we see around us. It's a cosmic fluke. This is one perspective, and I think a very limited perspective – a kind of scientific fundamentalism. You start with undifferentiated, very simple particles coming out of a Big Bang, and you end up sitting here this morning reflecting on notions of cosmic allurements. The universe is thinking about itself here this morning, through you and me. I've concluded that evolution is the way the Holy One creates.

Salvation then is the realization of an evolutionary bias towards increasing levels of wholeness. It's more of a process than an event, and it happens repeatedly in our life time, not just once and for all time. You might call this bias toward wholeness beauty, a notion that includes our common aesthetic ideas about beauty, but which transcends it. Beauty is so compelling because wherever we find it, it is an intimation of perfection. It is actually a blessed relief from the blessed unrest of evolution. We see something beautiful and our soul locks onto it as the promise of a wholeness that in the realm of time and space eludes us. In this realm, beauty, the wholeness and the holiness of pure Spirit, is an ever-receding horizon. We never get there. But beauty is a down payment on that perfect future. I see the sun light up a maple tree across the street as I'm writing this and I inside I hear myself say Ahhhh... Ok that's where we're headed." It's a glimpse of the perfection that I'm called to move toward. It's why beauty stops us in our tracks.

The story of Zaccheus is a beautiful story – a story of a man being drawn by the promise of perfection as recognized in Jesus of Nazareth. Salvation comes to Zaccheus'

home because he's ready to take the next step toward the promise of wholeness, the beauty of Spirit.

At the symposium yesterday that our environmental team magnificently presented, you could sense that salvation had come to this sanctuary. It came in the form of approximately 90 people who glimpsed the unspeakable beauty of Spirit in the planet earth, and who were willing to take the next step of divesting of the unsustainable lifestyles that has created our planetary crisis. We all climbed a tree yesterday to get a closer look at the future that was passing by. Today, the Christ is calling us from within our home planet, alluring us into a holy communion, a banquet of wisdom. Are you ready to come down and welcome this Christ into your heart and home?