“Going out on a Limb to See Jesus”

Preached at the Wollaston Congregational Church

On October 30th, 2016

**Focus scripture:** Luke 19:1-10

I’ll begin today by talking a little about my approach to the Bible. When the search committee first interviewed me to be your minister, one of the questions they asked was “are you a biblical literalist?” I could tell that the hope was the answer would be “no.” And indeed, I am not a biblical literalist, at least not in the way most people think of it. In fact, I believe it is impossible to be a biblical literalist … but that is something to talk about another day.

On the other hand, my interaction with the scripture is not only academic. I do not rely solely on the historical critical method. Rather, I have adopted way of reading the biblical stories *as though* they were literally true: looking at the passage from this angle and that. I try to put myself in the place of the different characters. What were their thoughts and feelings, at the time of the narrative? Why did they act the way they did? How would I feel in the same circumstances?

I have found that using this method draws me into a deeper place than analysis can do. Often, when I have finished my study, meditation, and otherwise pondering of the scripture, the question of whether the text is literally true doesn’t even matter anymore.

So first, as I prepared for today’s sermon, I tried to put myself in the place of Zacchaeus, and then in the place of members of the crowd. And as I sat with this story for some time, I began to believe that Zacchaeus wasn’t simply a shorter than average man. I began to see him as having some form of the condition known as dwarfism. Some people with these conditions today prefer to be referred to as being “short statured.” That is consistent with the biblical translation we read.

Now, can I be sure that Zacchaeus had such a congenital condition? No. The scholars are in disagreement, but what’s new? Suffice to say the words used to describe Zacchaeus being short in stature could mean, but do not necessarily mean, he had a form of dwarfism. I choose to imagine that he did.

Going in this direction, the passage begins to make a lot of sense to me. Particularly as Luke sees it as worth noting that Zacchaeus runs ahead of the crowd and climbs a tree to see Jesus while he is passing through Jericho. Zacchaeus is also described as the chief tax collector in Jericho. This is a clerical job that would have been open to a person seen as having a disability. Conditions that would perhaps rule out farm work and other manual labor.

Another reason I think Zacchaeus has a form of dwarfism is the crowd’s behavior toward him. When Zacchaeus comes to see Jesus, they don’t part the way and let him through. They might do that for someone who was a little on the short side. Instead they look on him with derision, even blocking him from view, closing ranks and filling the gaps so that he cannot see through.

They are not going let in the shameful little tax collector. “No wonder he collaborates with the Romans,” they mutter, “even organizing the other tax collectors! He is an angry man, frustrated by his lack of stature, over-compensating with officiousness.”

In my mind’s eye, as Zacchaeus runs back and forth, trying to get a glimpse of Jesus, from the back of the crowd. The crowds, lining the parade route, close ranks. They know he is running behind them but meanness is contagious. They choose to keep him out.

And I then feel a prickling of shame. It’s the shame of cheerfully singing that ditty “now Zacchaeus was wee little man…”. Whenever this passage has come up, that childhood song runs through my mind. And I’m ashamed to say, it never occurred to me that I was singing about someone with a medical condition that might have caused a good deal of psychological and physical pain.

This is the nature of marginalization. Sometimes we don’t know we are doing it. Sometimes we don’t know we are experiencing it. But it can explain many of the “isms” of our time, of which able-ism is probably one of the least challenged.

I was just noticing, the other day, how many of our churches, like this one, require the use of steps. You need to go upstairs to get into the sanctuary and downstairs to go into the social hall. This presents problems to anyone who needs to use a wheelchair or cannot navigate stairs. Were there few people with disabilities 100 years ago? Or were people who couldn’t use stairs simply expected to stay home?

This reminds me of an experience I had a few years ago. I was called to task by a strong advocate for people with disabilities in my home church. This woman has had ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s disease, for many years. She uses a motorized wheelchair to get around and a computer for communication.

While I served as church moderator, she came up with a list of low cost suggestions to make the church more accessible and submitted them to the church board. One of the issues was signage on how to get access to the elevator, as well as how to find the restroom equipped for persons with disabilities. I agreed with many of her suggestions, and thought it would be a good idea to do a study of the entire church building. A small group was going to meet and tour the building, thinking about the needs for signage. I announced a “walk through”

of the building in the worship bulletin. To my surprise and embarrassment, this woman was angry with my terminology. Why had I chosen to call this a “walk through” when the people we were supposed to be serving couldn’t walk? I took the point. This was oblivious able-ism on my part, I should have chosen better words.

But to get back to the story. Once I began down this path of imagining that Zacchaeus had dwarfism, it was hard to come back.

Jesus continues down the tour route, meeting Zacchaeus who is in the tree. Then he does the most marvelous thing. It is the thing that no one else will do for Zacchaeus. He looks up to him, looks up! When you are very short, it is a rare thing to have someone look up to you, particularly this famous preacher, Jesus of Nazareth. Not only that, “hurry up and come down,” Jesus says, “I’m coming to your house today….” So, just to recap, Jesus picks out Zacchaeus, from his hideout in the tree, looks up to him, calls him by name, and gives him the honor of being the dinner host that night. And the crowd murmurs.

Still, they figure, this is Jesus yet again, going to eat at the house of sinner. Their assumption is that this angry man, this stunted collaborator is going to repent, like they always do. At this point in the story many translations of the bible follow this line of thinking. Zacchaeus is seen as repenting and deciding to give half of his money to the poor. But, scholars have noted that the actions are more accurately translated in the present tense. He tells Jesus he *already* gives half his income to the poor, and if he finds he has overcharged someone on their taxes he makes up for it fourfold.

So, Zacchaeus is not the stingy tax collector the people assume he is. They are shamed in their murmuring at this man who looks different from them and has been ostracized by them.

It’s tempting to think that discrimination against people who look different belongs to the ancient world, not the 21st century. But it’s quite shocking to learn what some people will do even today, in response to people who look somehow different.

The other night I learned about a young woman who has a beard, due to a medical condition. When her facial hair first grew, she removed it, but she found it was a very painful process that caused her to bleed. Since then she has grown the beard, and embraced it as a part of herself. And yet she has received death threats online – simply because she does not remove facial hair.

Discrimination is alive and well in our world today, I’m afraid to say.

So, as we come back to the story, perhaps we might imagine the part that we play in the narrative. Are we members of the crowd, who form a tight circle around Jesus. We want to keep him to ourselves --- we the church --- and we cling together, our backs turned to the likes of Zacchaeus. Or are we like Zacchaeus, the one who has always been kept from getting a good view of Jesus. Because the crowd has determined that we are not worthy of setting sight on his face, never mind having him come over to dinner.

We could be playing either of those parts. But I think that Jesus is inviting us to companion with him. Neither in the crowd or in the tree, but looking over the oblivious crowd, for the ones who are left out but trying to sneak a peak. He is encouraging us to be the ones who invite ourselves into their world, to go and dine with the outcasts, to learn what it is like to be them.

And then the translation of the narrative. Does it matter whether Zaccahaeus already is giving his money to the poor, or decides to do it that the day he meets Jesus? Should the verb be present or future tense?

I suggest God doesn’t really care. Because the story, after all, is not about righteousness. It’s about being in relationship with God, through Jesus Christ. And that is how salvation came to Zacchaeus’s house and it is how it will come to this house.

Amen