

THE JOY OF SALVATION

Luke 19:1-10

From our good friend Tony Campolo: “I seem to be particularly dangerous when I get on elevators. Our society teaches us to turn and face the doors and stand there quietly. But in my younger days, I loved to turn around and face the others in the elevator with me and say something like, “You’re probably wondering why I called this meeting.”

“Once when I was in the elevator of a New York skyscraper filled with very serious faced businesspeople, I smiled and said, ‘Lighten up. We’re going to be traveling together for quite a while. What do you say we sing?’ Incredibly, they did!! I don’t know whether they were intimidated by me or just wanted to have some fun, but businessmen with attaché cases in hand and businesswomen in their power suits joined me in singing, ‘You Are My Sunshine.’ When I got off at the seventieth floor, one man got off and walked down the hall with me wearing a big smile on his face. I asked him, ‘Are you going to the same meeting I’m going to?’”

“Nah,” he said, “I just wanted to finish the song.”

“In Archibald MacLeish’s great play, J.B., Satan is asked what he misses most about heaven and he answers, “The sound of the trumpets!”

“Indeed, to be in the presence of God is to be part of a glorious celebration. Sometimes that is hard to grasp when I am in the pulpit looking at the somber faces of those in the congregation. I hear them sing, ‘We know the joy of the Lord,’ and I feel like saying, “Would you please notify your faces?”

I know exactly what Tony means. It has always been a bit of a mystery to me, particularly when we sing the great hymns of the church how so many of the congregation look as if they were sitting in a dentist chair having a root canal! I have come to the conclusion, after nearly 20 years of being in this side of the worship experience, that there are a couple of reasons why this is so. One is that people are concentrating hard to sing the correct words and if you read music, follow the music. All this takes tremendous energy and requires the use of the focus muscles in our faces which include the furrowed brow, proper voice projection and proper worshipful faces!! It can be very difficult, almost impossible to smile when all your energy is being channeled in this direction.

The second possibility is more likely the root cause of somber faces in worship – the following illustration says it better than I ever could...the title of it is “Appropriate Church Behavior.” In church last Sunday I noted a small child who was turning around and smiling at everyone. He wasn’t gurgling, spitting, humming, tearing the hymnbooks or rummaging through his mother’s handbag. He was just smiling. Suddenly his mother jerked him around and in a stage whisper that everyone could hear, said, “Stop grinning. You’re in church!” With that she gave him a slap on his hind side, and as the tears rolled down his cheeks she added, “That’s better,” and returned to her prayers. Here was a woman sitting

next to the only life left in our civilization, the only hope, our only miracle, our only promise of infinity. If **he** couldn't smile in church, where was there left to go?"

Every time I read this my heart breaks a little bit more. Yet whenever I have asked church people why they look so somber when worshipping our Lord and Savior, the stock answer I can guarantee on hearing is, "This is the way we were taught to behave in church!" Perhaps. I was taught in the very same school you all attended, but simply cannot sing about the saints of the church with a joyful voice and have my face look as though I am singing a funeral dirge!!

What does this have to do with our scripture lesson for today?? Good question! This morning we hear the story of a wee man...Zacchaeus. He seems to be a peculiar little man – a social outcast, treated with scorn by his neighbors, yet determined to find joy in spite of his place in society. In ten short verses, we learn a lot about this little man from Jericho. Not only is he rich; as the chief tax collector he is particularly despised by his fellow Jews. The chief collectors were known for colluding with Rome and for taking advantage of others to make a good profit for themselves. (Feasting on the Word, year C, volume 4, page 260).

Luke typically does not have much good to say about the rich. Early in the gospel, Jesus blesses the poor but warns the rich, saying, "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation. (6:24) In Chapter 12, Jesus tells the parable of the rich farmer who hoped to build bigger barns to store all his crops but dies that very night. In chapter 18 is the story of the rich young ruler who walks away sad because he cannot bring himself to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. Why should the story of this deceitful chief tax collector have a better ending??

It appears that Zacchaeus had a burning curiosity to meet Jesus. He had heard about him and wanted to just get glimpse of him, but as small man the crowds got in his way and the townspeople were certainly not going to make it easy for him to get to the front. Not one to be deterred, Zacchaeus who by now is tired at staring at the backs of people vainly trying to jump up to see over their shoulders, runs on ahead of Jesus and climbs a Sycamore tree. Finally, he has a clear view, but to his and everyone else's surprise Jesus stops and gives him the honor of staying at his house that night – to which the social outcast responds with great joy!! Predictably the good church folk grumble that Jesus is even giving this sinner the time of day; when Zacchaeus stretches as tall as he can and announces he will give half his possessions to the poor. Not only that, he will repay four-fold any fraud he has committed against his fellow Jews – which is way beyond what Jewish law demanded. Zacchaeus is so filled with joy that he makes these pledges with a smile on his face and light heart. Is it any wonder that Jesus declares, "Salvation has come to this house."?

The story of Zacchaeus tells us that the gospel is about serious commitment to God, but it is also about joy. As noted earlier, we good church folk do not always do joy well! I am so glad that here at Marquis, at times, we applaud the anthem, or our musicians...this is often

a sticky point for choirs and choir directors who will insist they do not share their music for applause. They are not performing; they are giving praise to God using their God given gift! I agree 100%. Consequently, when the church applauds, we are only adding our praise to yours! We are applauding and thanking our God who has blessed us richly with talented people! I can tell you quite frankly from experience that this is not always the case. Without casting aspersions, I have served a few churches where the choirs made a joyful noise for sure, just not a beautiful one!!

The exchange between Jesus and Zacchaeus is quite remarkable. Jesus is listening to him as the little man gives evidence of his extravagant repentance. N. T. Wright says, “Here repentance isn’t just a change of heart; as in Judaism in general, repentance involves restoration, making amends. Zacchaeus is determined to make amends lavishly. He doesn’t offer to sell all his property, nor does Jesus demand this of him. But by the time he’d given away half of what he owned and made fourfold restitution we can imagine that he would find himself in seriously reduced circumstances. (N.T. Wright, Look for Everyone, page 223).

But Zacchaeus doesn’t care. He has found something much more valuable. “Today I have to stay at your house becomes, “Today salvation has come to this house. Where Jesus is, there salvation is to be found, for those who accept him as master and reorder their lives accordingly. Zacchaeus has discovered the joy of salvation.

Repentance is one of those church words that is easily misunderstood and misinterpreted. It is quite easy to feel sorry for our actions – quite another thing to completely turn away from our sin and turn toward God with all of our concentration and energy. Zacchaeus does this 180° turn and is fully welcomed into the Kingdom of God. He also becomes completely unfettered of the burden of his sins. He rejoices as he should with his new lease on life.

Where do you find yourselves this morning? With whom do you identify in today’s parable? There is no right and wrong answer to this question. Rather, I pray that you discover the joy of your salvation and let that joy shine in your faces, your conversations and in your music.

A closing illustration on sin! During a dream I once had, I died and promptly met with St. Peter at the famous “Pearly Gate.” Upon being taken into heaven, Peter began to show me around. One immediate observation I made was that on the walls of an enormous warehouse, I saw thousands of clocks. All of these clocks were ticking away but at different rates. I then noticed that under each clock was a name plate with a name engraved on it. Naturally, I asked the significance of all this. Peter informed me that each clock was designed to keep track of an individual still on earth. Each time the person committed a sin, the hands on the clock made a complete revolution. Upon closer examination I began to recognize a few names. After searching for Vern’s name, and not finding it, I inquired as

to the location of his clock. St. Peter replied, “Oh, his clock! We moved it into the office and are using it for a fan!

Friends, please do not let another day go by without sharing the joy of your salvation with every and anyone you meet. When people see your joy, and hunger for it themselves listen to the following advice. Think of the people who first taught you the faith. Did they have a novelist’s gift for vividly retelling stories from the Bible, a journalist’s precision in relating all the details, a detective’s persistence in assembling pieces of corroborating evidence?

They may have demonstrated some of those talents, but it’s not likely this was what made the difference for you; not likely that this convinced you Jesus Christ is a Lord worth following.

No, it was something else. Something very personal. Something about the way their Christian faith had become integrated with who they were.

That something was, relationship – the living relationship they had with the risen Lord. Whether in word or deed, or some combination of both, they opened up to you the deep and abiding joy of that relationship and let it be known that you could have that sort of relationship too. There was something about their lives that made them witnesses to Jesus: simply by knowing them, you could come to know something of him.

The words are indeed worth pondering! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit! Amen.