

Connecting with Zacchaeus

Luke 19:1-10

Rev. Dr. Ken Henry

Which one of you having a hundred sheep and losing one of them does not leave the ninety nine in the wilderness and go after the e one that is lost until he finds it? Luke 15:4

Someone's knocking at the door, somebody's ringing the bell,
someone's knocking at the door, somebody's ringing the bell,
do me a favor, open the door and let 'em in.

Paul McCartney

Zacchaeus is not so unfamiliar to us. He works with us every day, lives next door, is quite friendly, and talks to us frequently. He seems pretty happy. Two kids, money, position in the company, nice car. When the subject of church or religion comes up in conversation, Zach reminds us that he is a lapsed Catholic, a Jack Mormon, a sports enthusiast, and too busy on the weekends anyway. He used to go to church when he was younger, but not anymore. Sometimes he shows us pictures of his scuba diving trip to Belize, a fishing trip for Marlin and Sailfish in Los Cabos; and he often rides his Italian made bicycle to Peets on Sunday mornings. One could easily surmise that Zacchaeus is successful by the world's standards, although sometimes we have ventured to say to someone: "he seems lost" or that he could be spending his time and money on more important things, like saving the world.

Secretly, we would like to invite Zacchaeus to our church, but we don't want to appear too pushy. We already know how we react when someone attempts to "evangelize" us—we get our hackles up. We clearly don't like someone telling us what to believe so why would Zacchaeus feel any differently? We just don't want to give him the wrong impression. Besides, if we broach the subject of the bible or religion, he will probably think we are a bible thumper or a Jehovah witness—we're not—we're mainline, still, we've been wondering. . . wondering in terms of our faith

--how do we connect with Zacchaeus?

This week, I spent some time reading book by Jim Henderson on talking to people about our faith. I realize I'm treading on uncomfortable ground asking us to think how we share our faith with someone outside the church. Talking to someone about faith or religion can bring up all kinds of baggage. And in truth, I probably have the advantage because pastors are supposed to talk about their faith—that's my job. (And I love my job) Nevertheless, while we can point our fingers at examples of **how not to talk** about Jesus, God, The Church, spirituality, and other potentially religious landmines, we find ourselves ambiguously uncertain on what to say at all. How do we talk about our faith?—especially to someone like Zacchaeus?

I've met Zacchaeus. He was my dentist. In the dental chair, sticking metal instruments into my mouth, as you can imagine, Zacchaeus had my undivided attention. And while working on a filling or two, when he discovered I was a pastor of a Presbyterian Church, Zacchaeus filled me in on his Roman Catholic background growing up as a child in New York City. Zacchaeus had several questions and doubts about religion. Like the short man, in Luke's Gospel, the man who climbed a sycamore tree to get a closer look at Jesus, I can still see my dentist's masked

mouth and nose, bouncing up and down, hovering over me. We might say, he had a captured audience. Because while Zacchaeus asked all of his theological questions, all I did was make patient noises like: “uha” and aaahhh. I was not in my best form. Yet, after a few appointments, and a few months, Zacchaeus showed up at worship. He also brought his wife and two boys with him. They began to attend regularly. They went through new member classes, attended retreats, worked with the youth group, taught Sunday school, got involved, and then Zacchaeus became the moderator of Deacons and, by the way, a close friend.

If you think about it, in essence, this is Jesus’ strategy, too. In Luke’s Gospel, Jesus befriends someone of great wealth and position, but also, unlike my dentist friend, a person of ill repute in the community. Indeed, Jesus “takes the risk of being misinterpreted, misunderstood, and misquoted” by going to spend the night with this man, by following Zacchaeus into his home, into his world, his context in order to build a genuine relationship with him. He doesn’t seek him out as a means to an end—in other words to get him to go to church, or have an emotional cathartic conversion, or convince him to drop everything and physically follow him to Jerusalem—which he doesn’t—but rather that Zacchaeus’ might experience a kind of healing.

Now, we know there are plenty of places in the New Testament where Jesus heals people—of blindness, paralysis, excessive bleeding, disease, unclean spirits and even death—but Jesus’ offer of healing to Zacchaeus is different. Because what Zacchaeus needs most is to be restored to his community—to make amends with his neighbors and to find healing by making things right with those he has wronged.

It’s interesting to me that while much of Luke’s Gospel is about bringing the good news to the poor, here is a passage where the good news is for someone like Zacchaeus, someone like many of the people we will encounter this week—at work, at school, in Willow Glen, someone like the guy sitting on the front of this bulletin cover—someone like me.

So how do we connect with Zacchaeus? How do we help Zacchaeus find community?

I came across an interesting phrase this week that has stuck with me in light of all our attempts to make a spiritual connection with those around us. That phrase is:

People change at a certain speed, the speed of making sense.

We can’t push it.

We can’t spell it out for this person.

We can’t say, “Trust me on this; I know what’s good for you. I’ve been there. I’ve done that.”

Before talking to Zacchaeus, let’s commit ourselves to throwing all our best advice away.

We may be right, we may be absolutely correct, but to offer that great pearl wisdom may only serve to push that person farther away.

Do you want to connect with Zacchaeus? Here’s a strategy: Be yourself, be genuine, pay attention. When you ask him/her: “How are you?” stick around for the answer. Take time to listen. Pray for him or her. Work on your small talk, don’t give up on that person—remember

people change at a certain speed, the speed of making sense.

Chris was Melinda’s fiancée. Melinda went to church with her family, and Chris didn’t. Chris was a great person; fun, interesting, bigger than life. Everyone loved Chris.

Of course, every Sunday afternoon, Chris came over for Sunday dinner, and often Melinda's family talked to him about what was going on over at the church and Chris would make some jab at Christianity. To please his future in-laws, Chris went to church on Easter and Christmas, but that was about it. Chris was and is a very loving, caring, and fun person. And one morning, Chris told me and others, he just woke up in the morning, heard the birds singing, and it all made sense: God, Jesus Christ, Faith, Community, even this Table.

Indeed, this Table is God's reach toward us, toward Zacchaeus, toward Chris, toward the poor, and ultimately toward anyone desiring a spiritual community. This is God's table of transformation and restoration. It is a Table where we confess our faults make amends with our brothers and sisters, and find healing.

"Come down from that Sycamore tree," Jesus calls to us, "for I must stay at your house today." But then his invitation begs another question, a question which each of us must wrestle with and discern:

When Jesus arrives at our doorstep, will we let him in?