

“Get Out of the Way!!”

October 4, 2015

The “E” Word: Evangelism Means Sharing Good News series

We’ve been talking about the “E” word - evangelism. We started out by going back to what evangelism really means - sharing good news. We learned about invitation from Philip who invited his friend, Nathanael, to “come and see.” We talked about how important it is to share our stories as we heard Paul’s own story of how God’s grace transformed him. And today we hear about Zacchaeus - the one we assume is the short guy who climbed a tree to see Jesus.

One thing about Zacchaeus: he was determined, wasn’t he? When folks were making it difficult for him to see Jesus, when those who were following Jesus got in the way, Zacchaeus went up a tree and out on a limb so that he could see what was going on. He took a risk that not everyone was willing to take.

Before this point in Luke, we’re told that Jesus is a friend to tax collectors and sinners, and it’s getting him into trouble. Notice that tax collectors were their own special category – as if being named a sinner wasn’t bad enough! We may have strong feelings about taxes, tax cuts, and tax reform. But in Jesus’ time, many tax collectors abused the system and became rich off of their peers. They worked for the Roman government, but many of them gained wealth by cheating the poor and charging more than what they actually sent to Rome. It was an unjust system, and to put it bluntly, Zacchaeus was a hated fraud.

So why Zacchaeus? Luke gives us a lot of details – we know his job, his status, his height, and we know that he wants to see Jesus. But we don’t know why. Maybe he’s just curious or anxious to make mean comments. Or maybe he’s hungry or desperate to understand what all the fuss is about. The fact is we really don’t know.

Zacchaeus is more than a powerful example, though that helps. No one would have predicted it, and I’m sure people couldn’t believe that Zacchaeus - of all people - would have such a turn-around. He has a reputation! People know who he is, and they’re quick to mutter about it when Jesus calls him to come down. They try to keep him from Jesus.

We’re just as surprised when hardened criminals or people we thought would never change suddenly make a turn-around. We get caught off-guard when we’ve put people into categories. We have limits for people, but sometimes - many times - God works to undo those limits. We have to get out of the way and let God work how God wants to work - not how we think God should work!

Zacchaeus takes a risk. It was socially unacceptable for a grown man to run or climb trees. He embarrasses himself for the sake of seeing Jesus, though still at a distance.

Perhaps Jesus sees that Zacchaeus is open and willing to change. Jesus responds with powerful words. Come down! Zacchaeus must stop looking from a distance. He cannot be a casual observer.

This is a powerful moment. Christ calls us to come to him and know him, and we can't do it at a distance. Jesus is clear about his mission. He has come to seek and save the lost. Everyone needs Jesus - rich and poor, humble and proud, "us and them."

"Today," Jesus says, "salvation has come to this house!" Even as Jesus says this, the disciples watch with skepticism. Even after Zacchaeus promises to make right on the wrongs he's done and then give away some of his wealth, people stare at him in disbelief. Could he really change so drastically? Is this for real?

There's good news here. We can live faithfully and know that salvation isn't based on our efforts. Even as Zacchaeus is looking for Jesus, Jesus is looking for him. As we celebrate baptism today, it's a moment to know that God's grace is for all of us - no matter our age, no matter how much we understand, no matter what. As we come to the table, it's a time to experience God's grace for ourselves. It's nothing that we earn. We don't have to be "good enough." We just have to come.

We don't know more about Zacchaeus, but I bet that he had fallout from his decision to change his life. He rejects the world of getting and taking that he's been part of for so long. Maybe his friends were stunned, maybe his boss was disappointed, but we're told that his household was transformed. It wasn't just him – his family was made whole because of his encounter with Jesus.

Just like those disciples who stand outside and grumble, we're slow to learn. We sit and grumble, too, and we hold onto our prejudices about people ("He can't ever change.") and about situations ("We can't do that – it's not possible."). All the while, Jesus is at work for the Kingdom of God!

Maybe we don't realize how much we need Jesus at our table, in our home, and in our lives until he's there. We need to make more room for Jesus in our lives, and we need to make room for Jesus to work in the church. We need to get out of the way. As long as one person needs Jesus Christ, we have work to do.

In our pessimism – when we think there's no new possibility, when we think there's no way for someone to change, when we've given up, when we're helpless, hopeless, with no dreams and no excitement and no passion, remember that Jesus went to Zacchaeus. Jesus stops for even one – even one we might not embrace at first! Each of us matters to God. It's outrageous Good News!

When even one person experiences love, finds forgiveness, has hope, receives affirmation, is transformed, or feels joy, then the Kingdom is coming! How will you keep it going? How will we keep it going so that people will hear Jesus say – “Today salvation has come!”?

My prayer is that we can be more like Jesus and less like the crowd. More gracious, more compassionate, more attentive to those who are seeking Jesus. Less judgmental, less legalistic, less ignorant and uncaring about those who we might view as “outsider.” More willing to get out of the way and let God be God.

Jesus came to seek and save the lost. And notice that the only label he gives to Zacchaeus is when he calls him a “son of Abraham.” He offers grace and acceptance. He welcomes all and eats with them. That’s what Jesus does today. This is his table. He invites us here. May we experience grace in a powerful way today.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.