

Greenhills Community Church, Presbyterian

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SHORT PEOPLE

Lee Sanders REPI

Luke 19:1-10 (and Isaiah 6:1-8)

Tonight, is Oscar Night. Will anyone be watching? Back in 1977, a song came out by Randy Newman, called "Short People." You may recognize Newman as the composer of the *Toy Story* music. He has been nominated for 20 Academy Awards, and has won 2. "Short People" has a great, catchy little tune, but if you stop to listen to the words, you might be surprised. He says, "Short people got no reason to live. They got little hands and little eyes and they walk around tellin' great big lies . . ." He adds, "Short people got nobody to love," and "I don't want no short people round here"! I couldn't help thinking of this song as I read the passage about Zaccheus. Certainly the people around him felt that way about Zaccheus, but not necessarily because he was short—he was a tax collector, and in fact, the chief tax collector. A tax collector would buy a franchise from the Roman government, and they would assign him an amount to collect. He could use any means, ethical or unethical, to collect the tax and could collect as much as he wanted, so that he kept what was over and above the assigned amount. So tax collectors were quite rich, but quite hated, because not only did they gouge the citizens, but they were collaborators with the oppressive Roman government. As chief tax collector, Zaccheus would have sold portions of his business to others, from whom he collected a percentage, so his wealth grew even more. And they were in Jericho, a fairly large city, which meant more opportunities to collect tax!

In our era, the tax collector might be compared to the Vichy government in World War II, or to the black overseers during slavery who often were harsher on their own people than the whites, or to subprime mortgage lenders, more recently. We can't imagine that anyone dreamed as a child of growing up to be a tax collector; we don't have any idea of the circumstances that brought Zaccheus to his current situation, but here he was.

Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem, and has been since the end of Luke 9. He knows and we know that he is headed toward confrontation with the authorities there and his almost certain death. In spite of several pretty blunt talks with his disciples, they still don't understand what is going on. He enters Jericho, where his reputation has preceded him. The crowds are along the sides of the road, trying to see this teacher and healer. It is well known that he befriends tax collectors and sinners—the Pharisees tell people that with a great deal of disdain. Perhaps Zaccheus has heard

this about Jesus, or perhaps he was just curious. But he wanted to see Jesus. He could tell that he would never get through the crowd to a front-line spot—either because he was so short or because people may have blocked him out of spite because he was a tax collector. So he thought quickly and ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree. It had low branches, so he could get into it easily and move farther up as needed.

To everyone's surprise, Jesus saw Zaccheus in the tree and stopped. He told Zaccheus to come down because he wanted to go to his house for dinner! It was a life-changing moment for Zaccheus—he had been SEEN, really seen, as a human being, we might say as a child of God—and he responded with joy. Luke goes on to tell us that Zaccheus gave away half of his wealth, and made restitution four times over for those he had cheated. We can imagine that that would have cut deeply into his estate, but he did it with joy. Jesus calls him a Son of Abraham—someone who “belongs” to God's people.

It really is a feel-good story, isn't it? But what does it say to us on this third Sunday in Lent, as we move, with Jesus and the disciples, toward Jerusalem? One way to find that is to ask ourselves where we are in the story. Are we Zaccheus (I'm certainly short!)—do we often feel shut out by the crowd for some other reason? Are we the crowd, failing to see Zaccheus to let him through or even blocking him because we think tax collectors don't deserve to get to see? Perhaps we are among the disciples, observing Jesus, who yet again, goes home with “the wrong people”. If for a minute we place ourselves either among the disciples or the crowd, we are struck by the fact that Jesus sees Zaccheus, someone that others ignore or just don't see. Some may fail to see him because he's short, others may choose to ignore him because of his work. But Jesus sees the person rather than the exterior or the profession, and initiates a relationship with one more “tax collector or sinner,” one more marginalized person.

At this point, I should tell you the rest of the story about the song. In the bridge, Newman says,

“Short people are just the same as you and I, (a fool such as I). All men are brothers until the day they die. (It's a wonderful world.)”

. . . before he goes back into insulting short people. The song was always a satire about prejudice, and the bridge is the real statement.

Who is it that we fail to see? Is it

- Short people?
- Sad people?
- People with mobility issues?
- People who are homeless?
- Service staff?
- In this world that seems to advantage couples, do we fail to see people who are single for whatever reason?

Why is it that we fail to see certain people?

- Are we too busy?
- Do we just not have the energy?
- Do we classify them as unimportant to us, not worth our time?
- Do we just not know what to say or how to interact with them?

I recently finished a book by Barbara Brown Taylor, called *An Altar in the World*. She talks about all the times we tend to miss God-sightings or opportunities for worship or times for gratitude in our daily lives because we just fail to pay attention. She says that people sense that there is more to life than they are being shown, and they search for this treasure. "The last place most people look is right under their feet, in the everyday activities, accidents, and encounters of their lives. . . . The treasure we seek requires no lengthy expedition, no expensive equipment, no superior aptitude or special company. All we lack is the willingness to imagine that we already have everything we need. The only thing missing is our consent to be where we are. . . ." And she goes on to say, "There is no way to God apart from real life in the real world."

The book is a series of "practices" designed to help us be more in tune with our world and with God. One of them is "the practice of encountering others". She claims that we all need someone to tell our stories to, someone to help us be less self-absorbed. She goes on to say that "the hardest spiritual work in the world is to love the neighbor as self—to encounter another human being not as someone you can use, change, fix, help, save, enroll, convince or control, but simply as someone who can spring you from the prison of yourself, if you allow it. All you have to do is recognize another you 'out there'—your other self in the world—for whom you may care as instinctively as you care for yourself. To become that person, even for a moment, is to understand what it means to die to yourself." And I claim it is to understand what happened between Jesus and Zaccheus when Jesus looked up and saw the man in the tree.

"The everyday practice of being with other people is the practice of loving the neighbor as the self. It is the practice of coming face-to-face with another human being. . . and at least entertaining the possibility that this is one of the faces of God."

A good pilot project would be to focus on someone we may not typically "see", such as the cashier at the grocery store. Try engaging her next time you get groceries. You don't have to invite her home for lunch, but just look at her face while she is trying to figure out which kind of lettuce you bought. She is someone's daughter, perhaps someone's mother as well. Just acknowledge her when she hands you your change or receipt. Just meet her eyes for a moment and say, "Thanks." Sometimes all another person needs to know is that she has been seen—not as cashier but as person. And even if she does not seem to notice, the encounter has occurred. You noticed, and because you did, neither of you will be quite the same again.

Jesus was the master of the personal encounter, and he demonstrated it not only by what he said but also by what he did.

Jesus does the eye-to-eye thing with Jews but also with foreigners—Roman centurions, Samaritan lepers, Syro-Phoenician women, tax collectors, and hostile Judeans, as well as with his own disciples. No one is excluded from Jesus' circle of concern, because we are all made in the image of God.

I love words, and I learned a new one recently. The word is "xenial" - X-E-N-I-A-L and it means "hospitable." A related word is "philoxenia" from "philo" meaning love of and "xenia" meaning stranger. Jesus was the master of philoxenia—love of the stranger, and our story today is just one of many examples. (Did you know that according to Jonathan Sacks, chief rabbi of Great Britain, "the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament, in one verse commands, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself,' but in no fewer than 36 places commands us to 'love the stranger.'")

I'm left with two questions:

- (1) How do we "climb the tree"? How do we put ourselves in a place where Jesus will find us and invite himself to our home?

It probably helps if we read the scriptures, pray, read otherwise people. In fact, the Thursday night Simple Supper and Study sessions are talking about these very things—how to walk with Jesus. But the good news is that all we really have to do is to

turn in that direction and want to be found. God takes the initiative and will find us, even in a crowd, even if we are short.

(2) The second question is, How do we respond to God's extravagant grace?

In the Isaiah passage, we saw that Isaiah responded to God's glory and forgiveness by giving God the blank check of his life. And we saw that Zaccheus responded with joy and with restitution. We can "pay forward" the gift of grace we've received by taking time to see other people—the people that are often invisible to us: short people, tired people, those staff people we often just want to get past so we can go on with our "very important" days. It might be the cashier at Kroger, but it might be someone in this congregation you haven't connected with in a while. Allow that spark of Christ that is within you to connect with the spark of Christ that is within the other person. Or to put it another way, let that image of God that is you connect with the image of God that is the other person. As we've said many times in this congregation, you might be the only Jesus someone meets this week!

Let us pray: Gracious God, may we, like Isaiah and Zaccheus, respond to your call and to the fact that you recognize and claim us as your own with gratitude and with energy and with a new commitment to recognize everyone we meet as your beloved children as well. In Christ's name. Amen.