

Sermon: The Places Jesus Occupies**Scripture: Luke 19:1-10****Preacher: Rev. Will Burhans****Date: October 31, 2010**

We read this morning from the 19th chapter of Luke's gospel, which is one intense chapter. The story of Zacchaeus the tax-collector is the beginning of chapter 19 but before it is over Jesus will have made his triumphal entry into Jerusalem on a colt, he will sit before the city and weep over its impending destruction and then upon entering the temple area he will drive out the sellers and money-changers. All this in chapter 19 as his passion and death quickly approach and as we in the church are a month away from the last Sunday of the church year where we remember his crucifixion just before we enter into advent, the beginning of the church calendar and the birth of another cycle to come.

But first we read the story of Zacchaeus and we watch, amazed, as Jesus steps right into it, as he steps right into and occupies those places that we do NOT want to be and I mean where we REALLY DO NOT want to be with everything we've got we don't want to be in those places where Jesus systematically and purposefully enters.

The first place he occupies is the place of the despised, hated, small-hearted and tight-fisted, weasely little tax collector named Zacchaeus. Jesus has this huge crowd following him, admiring him, wanting to be near him, praising him up one side and down the other – a pretty nice position to be in – and in the midst of that most nice place where the ego is just soaking in the praise and adoration, Jesus stops, calls to this tax-collector perched in a tree – a great image for the way Zacchaeus has clawed his way above all those around him – and you might think Jesus is going to give him a tongue lashing like no other for the way he treats his neighbors – but instead Jesus says “come on down Zacchaeus because I must stay at your house today.” And the crowd goes quiet and seethes as they watch this interaction. “What?! He is going to have dinner with him?” For you politically liberal people in the congregation, that would be something akin to Jesus asking to have dinner with Glen Beck or for you political conservatives it would be like Jesus asking to have dinner with Michael Moore. Except to get a more accurate sense you'd have to have also personally been insulted and defrauded by Beck or Moore

to understand how people were feeling at that moment around Jesus. The scripture doesn't say so, but I wouldn't be surprised if Jesus followed Zacchaeus to his home by himself at that point, while everyone else stood around fuming not knowing what to do with themselves. In one moment, Jesus went from the most popular of stars to a disgraceful antagonist. "What? He wants to hang with that villain, that snake?! Wait a minute, this Jesus guy has must be unstable. What's he playing at?!"

At the beginning of chapter 19 Jesus steps into a place of disgrace and shame. But what he finds there is someone willing to be changed and transformed, someone open to being saved. "Salvation has come to this house." And here, I think it's worth noting that Jesus refers to salvation coming to Zacchaeus not as a result of some esoteric belief that he has in after-life with Jesus, but rather salvation comes because Zacchaeus is convicted to his core and his life is transformed from one of self-serving acquisition at the expense of others to one of self-sacrificing benefaction for the sake of others. That's how salvation came to his house. But, the *key* is that it came by way of shame and disgrace, that place where none of us want to be but where Jesus tends to find the most fertile ground for conversion. And so forever more Jesus stands right there in that frightening chasm of separation that disgrace and shame creates. That might be one of the reasons why the gospel not only commands us to care for the widowed and orphaned, the oppressed of our society, but also the prisoners, those who have even done something disgraceful or shameful.

But that's not the only uncomfortable or near unbearable place that Jesus steps. Within that same chapter, after losing a good amount of his popularity with the Zacchaeus debacle, he shoots himself in the other foot by going into the very heart of the economic and religious system of his society, to the temple, and he overturns the merchant and moneychanger's tables in protest of the whole corrupt system. OK, so making a personal decision about who he is going to be in relationship is one thing, but this is a whole new level of provocation. Those who thought he might be unstable in his relating to Zacchaeus are convinced of it now. You know, Rome of the ancient world was a peaceable kingdom and a lot of people, Jews included, were doing quite well under Roman occupation in the aura of Pax Romana. So what the heck is Jesus doing now?! He's entering into and occupying another one of those places where most of us really –

and I mean *really* - would rather not be: standing, by himself, over and against the status quo of society, such that he really is risking not only his livelihood and his place in his community but he's risking even his life itself to say "this system that we all accept benefits a small minority and crushes the rest and that's not ok!" And so he steps into that place of social pariah trying shake up the indifference, the dispassion, and the stasis to make room for transformation and new vitality, or as the gospels call it: "salvation".

But the gospel of Luke doesn't end until Jesus takes one more step, a dramatic and breathtaking step into the quintessential, most archetypal place where none of us want to be... and I mean a place where we really *really* don't want to be and that place is – dead. Most of us don't want to be shamed and disgraced. Nor do we want to be social pariahs. And we really don't want to suffer and die, most of us, right? The desire NOT to suffer and die in fact, many psychologists suggest, determines much of what we do and don't do in our lives, more so than anything else. Fear or denial of death is our chief motivator, many would say. And wouldn't you know that it's exactly there where Jesus takes his place. I think the reason that Christmas is so popular and has become a cultural phenomenon that stretches well beyond the Christian religion these days is that birth is a nice thing for us. We can celebrate birth, we can do birth, and we can sell lots of kitsch in relation to it. But Easter languishes far behind Christmas in popularity and Good Friday even further than that because death is a different story, death is just something we don't do. To say Jesus was BORN is to give us an occasion for parties and celebration – hooray, wahoo, yeehaw!! - but to say Jesus DIED is more than a downer, it's down-right terrifying at some level and don't make us deal with it until we absolutely have no other choice than to deal with it.

But the most radical and most critical and central claim of the Christian religion is that Jesus occupied the place of suffering and death for us so that even in that deepest and darkest of threats to human existence Jesus stands there and becomes our hope and our life.* You hear that?! This means that we need not even fear the greatest fearful thing of all because it's now occupied by Jesus himself! Wow. What a proclamation!

And so here we are on the day of Halloween, on the eve of All Saints Day, face to face with death, but death with a difference now. Not death as a deep black darkness that threatens to suck us into nothingness and meaninglessness forever, but death within

whom, at the very center and the very depth, is seated the figure of that man of love, Jesus Christ.

So this morning I invite us all to face and remember death as it is held now in the heart of Christ and join me for a time of prayer to specifically remember those who have died in your lives, celebrating the gift of each of those people to your lives and the promise that death for them is not nothingness but something amazing and remarkable beyond comprehension.

As Carl plays quietly Judy and Patty are going to come forward to light our candles of remembrance for those who have died. I will name a category of people, like parents, grandparents, spouses, etc... and I invite you to call out those names of people who occupy that place of death with Jesus Christ.

Let us pray: O God, on this eve of All Saints Day we remember the saints of our own lives who have died but remain very much present to us in memory and spirit. We pray this day in memory and honor of

1. Grandparents
2. Parents
3. spouses and partners
4. friends and mentors
5. our own and other's children
6. extended family
7. animal companions

For all these who have died and found their peace with You, we give you thanks. Help us to fear not our own deaths so that we can live and love more freely with the time we have left. All this we pray in Jesus' name, amen.

**The notion of "Jesus occupying the place of shame and death" comes from James Alison's theological writings, most recently Broken Hearts and New Creations.*