



Sunday, Aug. 9, 2020
August Sermon Series: Values That Guide Us

Everyone is Welcome Here
Pastor Shelley Cunningham

Luke 19:1-10 NRSV

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Yesterday - Aug. 8 - was the 86th anniversary of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's visit to Soldiers Field Park, just south of where our church building is now. He was here to honor the Mayo brothers, and to tour the Clinic. The day was hot - 85 degrees and muggy. The streets and lawn were packed with women in long skirts and hats, men in suit coats and ties, children riding on the shoulders of their fathers. It's estimated there were about 75,000 of them. I don't know where they came from since Rochester's population was only about 25,000 at the time. And I don't know how all those people managed to see the little convertible carrying the President, Dr. Will and Dr. Charlie as it snaked its way from Mayo Park to Soldiers Field. But I do know there was no climbing of sycamore trees to get a better look -- according to the DNR website, sycamore trees aren't native to Minnesota. Maple or elm maybe, but not sycamore. You can tell by the commemorative plaque that still stands across the field that day was a big deal for this little town.

There weren't quite that many people waiting to greet Jesus as he entered Jericho. But there was enough of a crowd that a shorter-than-average person was at a distinct disadvantage when it came to catching sight of the famous rabbi as he came walking past. But what made the biggest difference for Zacchaeus wasn't the tree. It was that the person he was looking for was Jesus. Jesus has this particular gift for seeing people the rest of the world overlooks. A few blind beggars sitting by the side of the road. An elderly woman worn down by a long illness. Children hidden behind their mothers' skirts. And those who made their living collecting taxes for the

Roman emperor. Which is why, even with a throng of people lining Jericho's dusty streets, Jesus takes notice of the man in the branches, and invites himself over for dinner.

We don't know what Zacchaeus was hoping for, why he climbed the tree that day. It might have been enough just to get a peek of the rabbi as he passed by. But we know that wasn't enough for Jesus. Jesus doesn't want a passing relationship with anyone. He wants genuine fellowship that affirms the dignity and worth of all people. He wants to get to know us; to sit down with us; to break bread with us. And he wants us to get to know and trust and care for him too.

That desire is the driver behind Zumbro's core value, "Everyone is welcome here." Our church's core values statement explains it like this:

Jesus brings all kinds of people together to be the church. Through the cross and resurrection of Christ, barriers to God's love are broken down and bridges of understanding and peace are built up. We seek to be a community where every person is valued and finds a place to belong.

This often runs counter to human behavior, or course. It's always easier to around people who are like us - who think and look and vote like we do. There's even a term for it: homophily. Birds of a feather flock together. I don't know much about birds. But I do know a little about people. Most of us are conflict-averse and comfort-driven. And the fewer differences there are, the less there is to get tripped up over. Still, we know this value is the heart of Jesus. And so, as followers of Jesus, we should pay attention to it. And, like many of our values, it's often a work in progress.

Diversity and inclusion expert Aparna Rae draws a distinction between exclusion, inclusion, and integration. We understand exclusion - intentionally leaving people out of a group. There's no place for that in a church. But most of our churches - indeed, most of our society's established structures - feel integration is good enough. With integration, there's space for people who think or look or act differently. But the reality is, most often, those people who have been integrated still remain on the edges. They're acknowledged, tolerated, even appreciated - as long as they don't challenge the status quo. The unspoken message of integration is, 'We want you to fit in here.'

That sounds benign, but social scientist Brene Brown points out there's a difference between "fitting in" and "belonging": "Fitting in is about assessing a situation and becoming who you need to be to be accepted. Belonging doesn't require you to change who you are. It requires you to be who you are."

We all shape-shift a little bit. We read the social cues and adapt our behavior as appropriate. That's part of what it means to co-exist with others.

But if everyone in the church is still working on 'fitting in,' we're still missing something: people's true and authentic selves. We're missing who God created them to be in all of their complicated, messy, beautiful facets.

And that's what it means to strive for inclusion. That's when all people have the potential to be part of the core group, valued for their whole selves, including the different experiences you've had in life. All have the ability to make decisions and have influence. All truly are welcome.

If everyone really is to be welcome at Zumbro, we need to be a church that strives for inclusion. We need pay attention to who's not here, we need to lift up and listen to voices that don't often get heard, and work like crazy. Because we have a long and wonderful history – but history tends to codify the status quo. And right now we have a change to do things differently. And the first place to start is not with our neighbor, but with ourselves. Because if you're like me, your world has gotten a whole lot smaller in the past few months.

Here in Minnesota we've done a pretty good job of staying home and staying safe. That's a commendable way to love your neighbor. But one of the side effects is that distance changes us. Physical distance can lead to emotional isolation. Our capacity for tolerance shrinks. Our sense of the many different varieties of people in the world gets smaller. And even if we want to appreciate our differences, if we want to go out of our way to build new relationships, we just can't.

Friends, please hear me: Welcoming people doesn't mean endorsing their behavior or agreeing with their beliefs. You may not approve of the way someone else spends their money or raises their children or casts their ballot. But it does mean seeing them as someone God loves. It does mean listening to them with genuine curiosity. It means sitting down and breaking bread together, and being patient, and making room for the Spirit to change your heart first. We're going to have a lot of chances to put this core value to the test in the weeks and months to come – at least I hope so. And not just because I hope we'll be able to hang out together here at church one of these days.

Because if Zumbro really embraces this core value, we will need to look around and see who isn't here in our pews and who is not. We will need to intentionally invite them in. We need to pay attention to how we reestablish our connection with our South Sudanese brothers and sisters and the at-risk teenagers who will seek sanctuary and support through the new LSS drop-in center on our middle level. We need to remember that Jesus heard the grumbles of the people who didn't agree with him, and he hung out with Zacchaeus anyway. Not because he wanted to change Zacchaeus, but because he loved him.

What I love best about this story of Zacchaeus is that it's just that – a story. Not in the fictional sense, but a person. Our church is made of people. We all know the sting of being excluded. We know the subtle rebuke of being kept on the edge. And we all ache, at our core, to be seen. To be noticed. To be missed.

Dear friends, know that Jesus sees you. Wherever you may be today ... on your couch, in your car, in a tree – Jesus sees you and says, there is a place for you in my family. There is room for you here, just as you are. And if you can't come to me, never fear: I will come to you. Because this church is God's house. This world is Christ's kingdom. And everyone is welcome here. Amen.