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Sunday, Mar. 21, 2021
Sermon Series: Love Without Limits

Making Room When We're in Need of a Change

Pastor Shelley Cunningham

Luke 18:31-19:10 NRSV

³¹Then he took the twelve aside and said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. ³²For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. ³³After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again." ³⁴But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

³⁵As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. ³⁶When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. ³⁷They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." ³⁸Then he shouted, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" ³⁹Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" ⁴⁰Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, ⁴¹"What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me see again." ⁴²Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has saved you." ⁴³Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

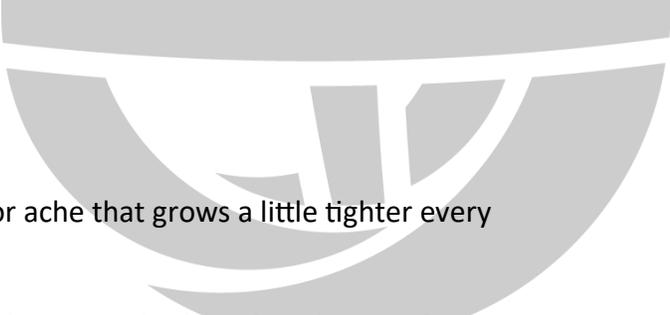
¹He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because 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."

How can you tell when you're in need of a change?

Maybe you feel it in your gut – it's unsettled, churning, tied up in knots.

Maybe you sense it in your head – thoughts that keep interrupting your everyday routine, daydreams that capture your fancy and seem a whole lot more appealing than reality.

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Maybe you hold it in your heart – there’s a deep yearning or ache that grows a little tighter every time you breathe.

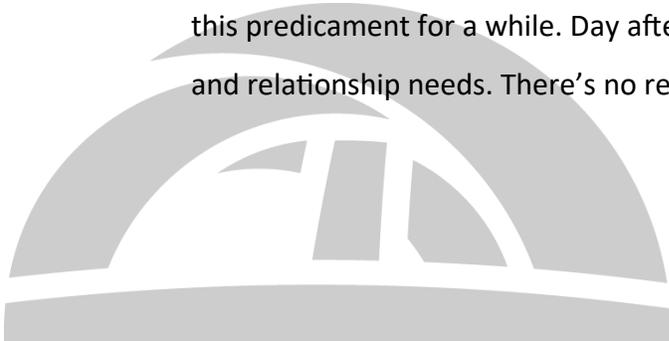
Most of us have at least a passing idea of when we need a change – whether it’s a change of scenery or vocation or routine. And most of us are in tune with our bodies enough to notice those clues. The bigger question is: then what? When those feelings show up, what do you do with them? If the answer is, *well* you may just be normal.

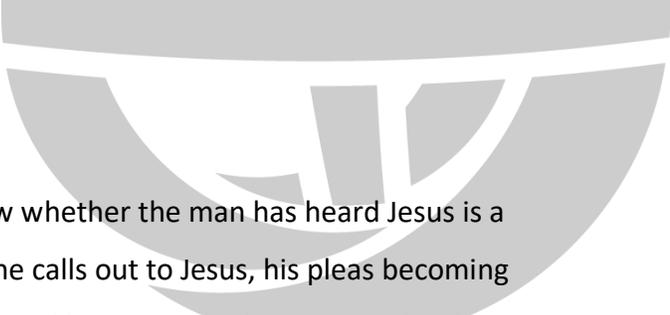
I’ve probably mentioned that getting a will has been on my to-do list for the past 17 years. I know it’s important. There’s a little ball of guilt that rattles around whenever I think about it. At least once or twice a year I commit to getting it done. I’ve gone so far as to download some will-planning documents and at one point I even started to read them. But then I run into questions I can’t answer and terms I don’t know and so many decisions ... I’m terrible at making decisions. And it turns out, every time I get to looking at those will-planning documents, there’s always something more pressing I need to do.

James Prochaska would say I am in good company. He’s one of the leading researchers in the field of change theory. His transtheoretical model outlines the five stages that human beings who are able to successfully make lasting change experience. It starts with something called precontemplation – basically, denying or ignoring that there’s an issue that needs to be addressed. Most of us live there a fair amount of the time. Eventually, enough discomfort happens to move into the contemplation stage. That’s when you admit there’s a problem, but you’re really not sure you want to do anything about it. It’s a lot easier to wish things were different than to actually do the work, right? Prochaska found that the majority of people spend the vast majority of their time in either the precontemplation or the contemplation stage. We want things to be different. We just can't bring ourselves to take the first step.

I think Professor Prochaska would have something to say about the change that emerges in today’s gospel lesson. We meet two people who seem to jump right past contemplation. They’re both actively seeking change in their lives ... or are they?

The first man we meet is the blind beggar. By his title and his station we might presume he’s been in this predicament for a while. Day after day he’s relied on the kindness of others to meet his physical and relationship needs. There’s no reason to think anything would ever be different for him – until





the rabbi from Nazareth wanders into town. We don't know whether the man has heard Jesus is a healer or he just has nothing to lose, but we do know that he calls out to Jesus, his pleas becoming louder and more insistent despite the shushing of those around him. He even knows exactly what he wants, and asks for it directly. It's a bold move, and one that's rewarded immediately.

It's even less clear that the second man is looking to make a change. Sure, his life was probably pretty lonely – as the chief tax collector for the despised Roman government, he was likely seen as a traitor to his people. But he did have status and wealth to console him. For all we know he was just curious when he tried to catch a glimpse of Jesus from that tree. And unlike the blind man, Zacchaeus doesn't ask Jesus for anything. Indeed, Jesus is the one who approaches him. But he does say yes to Jesus' request. And from spending time with Jesus, we learn that he's been prompted to make some pretty big promises that his life is going to change.

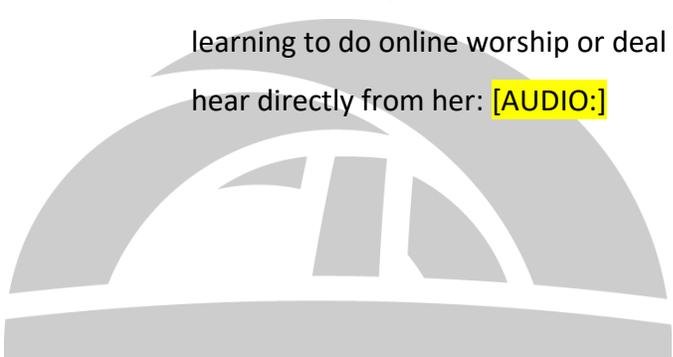
Here's the thing: We don't know if Zacchaeus really did any of those things he said he would – if he gave away his riches, or repaid money he'd collected. Maybe this dinner with Jesus turned him around for good. I'd like to think so.

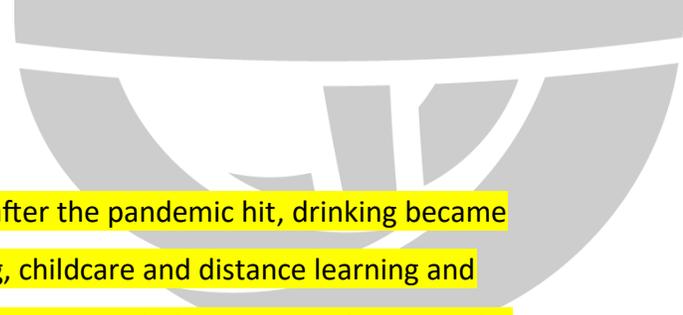
But even if Zacchaeus was no different than most of us, with the best of intentions but not so great follow-through, we do know Jesus wasn't just talk. Soteria – salvation – came to Zacchaeus' house that day. He did experience Christ's love and acceptance – and we know that love is the most powerful change agent in the world.

Have you noticed that as Jesus has been making his way to Jerusalem, he's been collecting all sorts of people? Even on the way to the cross, Jesus pays attention. It's what he does. He pays attention, and so doing, shows the kind of love that prompts other people to change.

So I wonder if those signs, those thoughts and feelings we experience when we know there's something that needs to be different, is the work of the Spirit. Might they be the way we know God is paying attention to us, that God is nudging us to move forward out of that contemplation phase, to actually make things different?

Not long ago I was talking with a pastoral colleague in northern Minnesota. We were discussing how life and ministry has been different over the past year. But for her the biggest challenge hasn't been learning to do online worship or deal with the pressure of the election. It was personal. I'll let you hear directly from her: **[AUDIO:]**





“I had already been worried about my drinking, but then after the pandemic hit, drinking became my main coping mechanism. Our days were full of juggling, childcare and distance learning and working full time jobs from home. It seemed like the only way to mark the transition between the day hours and the evening hours was a glass or two or three or four of wine. I knew that things were going from bad to worse.”

I thanked her for being strong and brave and vulnerable, and asked what pushed her out of the contemplation stage. One day, while mindlessly scrolling through FaceBook and sipping one of those glasses of wine, she saw an ad for a 21-day reset program. She doesn't know why she clicked on the ad this time. But the timing was just right – it was a *kairos* moment. All of a sudden she was ready to hear a good, saving word. She committed to trying the program and gave herself grace to take that 21 days one day at a time. That was a couple of months ago. She's very aware that to make this change stick she's going to have to take it seriously. Which is why she's trying to be open about it. “For a long time I joked about drinking with my friends. But I knew this wasn't a joke. I wasn't healthy. And I needed help and support and love I could get.”

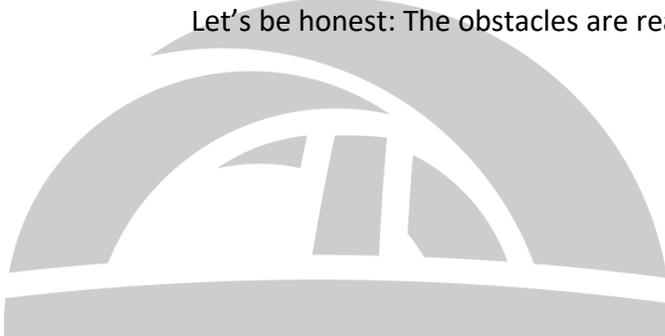
I think that's the key, friends. First, have to pay attention to all those nudges we are feeling that things need to be different in our lives. But then, we have to believe that if we are going to make that kind of change, we don't have to go it alone.

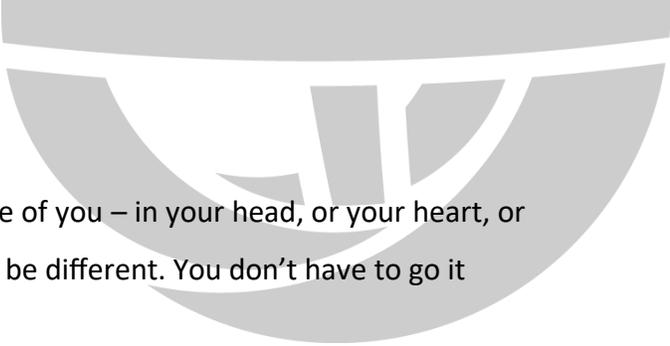
The blind man, after all, left with his sight, but also with a community of people who were praising Jesus. Zacchaeus left with his promises, but also with the public knowledge that he had said he would be different. They both had people to help them and hold them accountable.

The thing is, even harder than assembling a support system might be taking the step of forgiveness. You might need to forgive yourself for delaying and dithering, for not being brave, for the time you've lost and the people you've hurt. But nevertheless, we have always already been forgiven by the one who knows that we are flawed and loves us anyway. Isn't that the key to moving forward: trusting in that love and forgiveness that Jesus has already given us.

What change do you need to make in your life right now, and what might be holding you back from doing something about it?

Let's be honest: The obstacles are real. Inertia is powerful. So is fear, and distraction, and denial.





But don't sell yourself short. Listen to that small voice inside of you – in your head, or your heart, or your gut – that's whispering, "I want more for you. Life can be different. You don't have to go it alone. I am with you always."

Friends, that is salvation. That reassurance that Jesus sees you and cares for you is real. *The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.* The lost? That's the blind man, and the tax collector, and the grumblers, and the doubters, and the stuck ones and the people who don't have a clue where to start. And this promise of salvation isn't for later, sometime down the road. It's for now. Could that be the push you need to take a first step. To pick up the phone, make the appointment, lace up your shoes, assemble your support system. Hold on to it, friends. Because the Son of Man did come to seek out and to save the lost, and by giving his life, gives us salvation in abundance in him now. Amen.

