

Go, Do: Christ in Community
Sermon by Leah Fowler
Presbyterian Church in Leonia
October 30, 2016
Luke 19:1-10

Zacchaeus in the crowds: like a Cleveland Indians fan sitting in the bleachers at Wrigley Field during the World Series, or like the young black man in a hoodie carrying a bag of Skittles walking through a white neighborhood at night, his very existence touches people's passions, their anger, their fears. And with good reason-- in Zacchaeus' case, at least! The first two examples I just gave you may touch on some people's discomfort, but despite the assumed judgment of those around, neither the Indians fan nor the boy in the hoodie have done anything wrong.

As for Zacchaeus, however, we can be certain he *had* wronged people such as the ones gathered around Jesus that day. He wasn't just a tax collector, but the chief tax collector. He was the local kingpin in an operation that supported the dominating empire, and which did so with hungry palms; tax collectors were known for taking kickbacks for themselves. Sure, people grumble about high taxes in Leonia, but we can see they go toward excellent schools, a well-equipped police force and public services we all need, similarly to surrounding towns. However, those surrounding Jesus did not see their taxes benefitting their lives or their interests. But they could see that Zacchaeus was a very rich man.

So we can understand why Zacchaeus was not welcomed in this crowd. I imagine him, standing on his tiptoes while bodies jostled around him. If they noticed him at all, they probably enjoyed the small bit of power of being in a public space where the tax collector had no authority over them. And yet on that day, something powerful propelled this small man toward Jesus. Something more powerful than the desire for money. Something more powerful than representing the authority of Rome. He ran ahead of

the crowds. Maybe he did not understand it as his hands grabbed the rough bark of a tree, but before he knew it he was wrapping his legs around the bark as he swung his body onto a branch. A jolt went through him as Jesus approached; Zacchaeus looked over his shoulder when Jesus' dark eyes pierced his, as if there could be another guy behind him in that tree. "Who, me?" Zacchaeus silently said with his body. "Yes, you." Jesus silently gestured back to him.

When you are an outsider, it is a powerful thing to be chosen.

In one town where I worked, I loved seeing who would end up joining the Synchronized Swimming team at the local high school. Synchro was one of the few teams that had a no cut policy. For whatever reason, they always drew the most varied crew to their sport. Often, the kids I knew at church who were terribly shy, or off the scale ADHD, or simply...unusual... would end up on Synchro. It was the tribe for people with no tribe. So I saw Nora, who was 6'5" by the time she turned 13, and her best friend Colette, who never grew taller than 4'8" join Synchro. Nora had a hilarious sense of humor no one knew about because she would never say a word if there was more than 2 people around. Her sidekick Colette went through a year of bold experiments with makeup her 9th grade year which at best looked incongruent on her child-sized body. Mei-Xiu joined synchro; her name in Chinese means beautiful and graceful but while she was beautiful, she was also always in a hurry and late at the same time, which left little room for grace. I saw Emma join Synchro; she was master of the put-down in a way that clearly, but unsuccessfully, sought to mask her own insecurity. And then there was Jamal-- the one boy on the Synchronized swimming team who, though a natural athlete with a winning smile, liked to play with rigid stereotypes of what men and boys should do. Within a year on the Synchro team I witnessed that these kids would grow in confidence at the same time they grew in connected relationship. Each of those kids would turn into polished gems of personality and caring members of their community-- both at church and on Synchro. In later years I would watch

those kids who were once so painfully insecure become leaders who, as juniors and seniors, would welcome and invite the next generation of awkward kids into Synchro. I took notes on their behavior because they maintained a level of welcome that somehow surpassed that of the church. Watching them, I wanted to learn what they could teach me and show the church.

The power of what this Synchro team could do is to draw people from isolation, into intimate community. And that is precisely what Jesus did with Zacchaeus. Perhaps Zacchaeus had not always been shunned by others, but because his behaviors put personal profit above people, and corruption above community, he had edged himself out. And yet when Jesus met his gaze, Jesus told *him*, “Zacchaeus, hurry, come down! For I must stay at your house today!” That simple, self-invitation was a welcome that changed the course of Zacchaeus’ life. He committed that day to give half his possessions to the poor, and to pay four times that which he had cheated anyone. His passionate commitment was made of words meant not only for Jesus, but for the community surrounding them. They were words of restitution and reconciliation. And yet Jesus welcomes this man even *before* he changes his life.

In Jesus, God is always reconciling us to one another and reconciling us back to God. And this happens even after our death. Our tradition tells us that in our death, our baptism is made complete. Romans 6:3-5 says “When we were baptized in Christ Jesus, we were baptized into his death. We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that, as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life. For if we have been united with Christ in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” As much as we mourn the loss of loved ones who have died, we can also trust that God continues to call their spirits back into connection with the divine, and to continue that love we found while our loved ones were here with us.

What can we do in response to Jesus' invitation into relationship? We can say yes. Many of us already have. And then, can become people who also invite-- even when those invitations cross our comfort zones of familiarity. Something my work with teenagers has shown me is that everyone wants an invitation, from the most popular kid in the school to the one who never has been asked to hang out with a friend on the weekend. I have seen many kids who I would consider "great finds"-- real friendship material-- who get left on the margins because other "great finds" are also sitting on the side, also waiting for an invitation. But church becomes a place where people can discover that special thing God sets within each person. We draw it out of one another when we welcome as Jesus did. That invitation can be life-changing, as it was with Zacchaeus.

Jesus has invited you. What will you do with that invitation? I wonder.
Amen.