

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for January 24, 2010
Lessons: Hosea 4:1-8; 6:4-6 and Luke 19:1-10

OPEN EARS

Zacchaeus is up a tree and not just literally. We do not know why he made the choice to collect taxes from his own people for the Romans who occupied their land. We cannot say whether he was an opportunist or just a survivor, but either way, to his neighbors in Jericho he is a traitor – a collaborator with the foreign empire whose presence humiliated the Jews, many of whom no doubt believed that Jerusalem, not Rome, should be earth's foremost city. Zacchaeus is up a tree literally because he is a short man and wants a view of Jesus when the teacher everyone is talking about passes by on the road, but figuratively because he is trapped in the choice he made for whatever reasons at the time. No one feels sorry for Zacchaeus because he has grown rich off the oppression of his people.

It may seem strange to us in our culture that Jesus invites himself to stay at the tax collector's home, and so we may over-theologize the human transaction he initiates with Zacchaeus. Instead of our term "honored guest," think of the honored host. In that culture, the host gained honor in accordance with the social stature of his guests and the caliber of his hospitality. Because Jesus is a teacher of the way of God, he is offering Zacchaeus a chance to reconnect with God and be restored as one of God's covenant people, Israel. That's why Jesus answers the protests of the onlookers by reminding them that Zacchaeus too is "a son of Abraham," their forefather in the covenant.

Zacchaeus gets it. Gladly he will make the required fourfold restitution to anyone he has cheated and just as gladly give half his wealth to the poor. He is obeying the commandment that a thief must make fourfold restitution, and he is offering a big mitzvah, an act of generosity and kindness to those in need. We might be tempted to think the man is trying to buy his way back into the favor of God and his neighbors, but that's Protestant Christian thinking. He is doing what a faithful Jew does in response to Jesus' offering him the chance to be a Jew again. He is re-entering God's covenant with Israel. He knows what Jesus is offering him and jumps at the chance to be alone with his money no longer.

The current recession is not the work of God but the product of human greed and self-delusion. The suffering and frustration of life that greed and arrogance have caused is far from over, and unlike Zacchaeus, many of the Wall Street highrollers have had no change of mind or heart. The huge businesses that preyed upon the fears of the people and the

sufferings of the sick continue to stoke the fire of those fears hoping we all will try to hold on to what we have and resist any change that might produce a fairer, more compassionate society. But if anything good can be brought out of this calamity of greed and self-delusion, perhaps at least some people will be more open to realizing the two great truths of human life: we need God, and we need each other.

That's what Zacchaeus has come to know: he needs God, and he needs the community of his people. "It is not good for the human to be alone." But until Jesus invited himself into the alienated man's house, there was no opportunity, no offer of welcome to return. We need to recall that "return" is the core of what the biblical term "repent" means. It does not mean wallow in guilt. It does not mean give up what self-respect we have left. It does not mean "get all religious" as people now say, or submit to the authority of some religious group. It means return to God (who stands ready to welcome us), to the human community, and to our acceptance of our own humanity. That's why we need to be a community of faith and not just a religious organization. The human community has no self-evident welcoming committee, and people today are no more open to the outcast who has had a change of heart than were the citizens of ancient Jericho. The churches are Christ's welcoming committees and not only for being an open door to God but also for representing an open human community of people who know those two great truths about themselves: our need for God and our need for each other.

It does not trouble me, in itself, that so many people today are saying they choose to be spiritual but not religious. I ran a check. I used a computer program for study of the Bible to search the New Revised Standard Version we use mostly for occurrences of the word, in English, "religious." It found just three in the entire Bible, and two of those are negative, speaking of "religious" as a pretense. Religion is not really a biblical concept. We know what the greatest biblical concepts are: faith, hope, and love. Everything God wants for us and from us works from those three life-changing forces.

"Spiritual" is a biblical concept, but we need to be careful. I'm afraid that much of what I hear described as spiritual may be little more than privatized religion. That's not an improvement over the institutionalized religion of the churches, much as those institutions need improvement and, in fact, need repentance and transformation. Making myself my own pope or my own General Assembly of one is not spiritual. I cannot be my own church, because "church" is a collective noun; it is a gathering of people into a community of faith, hope, and love. It is not spiritual for the human to be alone, either.

Biblically, the concept of being spiritual begins with the acknowledgment and acceptance of our own humanity. God is spirit, but I am not. I am flesh and blood. God is eternal, but I am mortal, and my time of life is short. God lives, but my life is a gift with

every day I awaken from sleep and every breath I draw into my lungs. That I may even speak of my having a spirit is a gift from God. By nature, I am nothing more than a specimen of the mammalian genus pretentiously self-named homo sapiens – the human that is wise. It's easy to tell that we are the ones who did the naming of the animals. If I am anything more than an animal with an oversized brain I seldom appreciate, it is because of my connection with God. Anything truly spiritual about me is derived from that connection, which the Bible calls “the knowledge of God,” but we need to understand that for the Bible “knowledge” is relational, not merely intellectual. To know God is to have been brought into some depth of harmony with the Spirit of God so that we become in some measure infused with God's love and compassion for this world and its people. Spirituality is an open ear to God.

When we are given knowledge of God, the injustices done to people around us begin to trouble us, to disturb our equilibrium, even when those injustices do not directly harm us or our families or our friends. We begin to feel our connections with other people even when they are strangers. Gradually, as we grow in grace, “the image and likeness of God” is restored in us, not in the false sense of our becoming more than human – that's the desire that brings us down – but in the true sense of wanting for others what God wants for all of us. To live in the image and likeness of God is not to be superior or better; it is to represent God's love and compassion, God's grace, in whatever small ways we can in this world.

Hosea speaks God's bitter disappointment with the priests and teachers of Israel because the people are perishing for lack of “the knowledge” of God. The priests have served themselves by harping upon the people's sins so the frightened and guilt-ridden will bring more sacrifices. Sarcastically, the prophet says for God that the priests are hungry for the people's wrongdoings. What's that about? When the people brought animals to be sacrificed for their sins, the priests got to keep the edible portions of the meat. So, guilt was a pretty good deal for the priests. Keep them feeling guilty and you'll eat very well and perhaps have meat enough to sell and enrich yourself. God rejects self-serving leadership. We are not to manipulate people through fear, guilt, or shame. “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

When we know our need for God and our need for each other, life becomes for us a spiritual matter. “How do I pray and why?” is a spiritual question, but so are these: Is it possible to develop a civilization that does not depend upon having slaves of one kind or another? How can the two genders of humanity respect each other as equals? Can we be a community of faith in Jesus Christ without demanding a conformity that forces people to fake their faith and keep their questions to themselves? Can we admit that sometimes God seems far away from us, so we can help each other through those times with understanding? Lastly for now, can we live in creative discomfort with our need for God and for each other? May God's Spirit guide us as we try to walk together, with Jesus Christ. Amen.