

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

October 30, 2022 (Reformation Sunday, Proper 26, Year C)
Luke 19:1-10

A man on vacation was strolling along outside his hotel in Acapulco, enjoying the sunny Mexican weather. He heard the screams of a woman kneeling in front of a child. The man knew enough Spanish to determine that the boy had swallowed a coin. Seizing the child by the heels, the man picked him up, upside down, gave him a few shakes, and an American quarter dropped to the sidewalk. "Oh, thank you sir!" cried the woman. "You seemed to know JUST how to get it out of him. Are you a doctor?" "No, ma'am," replied the man. "I'm with the United States Internal Revenue Service."

This was the kind of man Zacchaeus was. A shake down artist. A man who could get the last quarter out of you.

Last week we talked about how DESPISED Tax Collectors were in the Roman world. They were COLLABORATORS with the enemy, TRAITOROUS Jews who did ROME'S DIRTY work, townspeople who got rich off the backs of their neighbors. But what's worse, Zacchaeus was a CHIEF tax collector; he was in CHARGE of all the tax collectors in the area. Imagine how rich HE was. And imagine how much the people HATED him. As Frederick Buechner puts it, "Zacchaeus...(was) a sawed-off little social disaster with a big bank account and a crooked job."

On this REFORMATION Sunday, I want you to NOTICE something in this story, though. Notice that Jesus ALREADY knew Zacchaeus' NAME. Zacchaeus thought HE was seeking to learn more about Jesus, but JESUS was REALLY seeking HIM, and already KNEW Zacchaeus more than he knew HIMSELF. Notice that Jesus approaches Zacchaeus and asks to share a MEAL with him, to break BREAD with him, something you ONLY did with your closest friends and your family, even NOW. And notice that Jesus made that invitation BEFORE Zacchaeus had SAID ANYTHING, had DONE ANYTHING.

That's how Jesus ALWAYS acts. Jesus CARES about those who are on the edge, on the fringes, on the OUTSIDE looking in. Jesus encounters those who society has declared unfit and wants to IGNORE, and he SEES them, recognizes them, seeks them out, spends time with them, and honors and blesses them.

And THAT'S what CHANGED Zacchaeus. Jesus didn't DEMAND ANYTHING of him BEFORE he loved him, didn't require him to DO anything BEFORE he loved him, didn't require him to SAY anything BEFORE he loved him; he JUST LOVED him.

You see, GRACE MATTERS. People RESPOND to grace. God's underserved grace is the ONE thing the church has to offer that NO other institution can.

And THIS is the Reformation that the Church STILL needs. The church has acted like God's grace is something we OWN and CONTROL, and something we give ONLY to members, and those we deem WORTHY of it.

But that is NOT our calling as the church; our calling is to offer grace as JESUS did, to EVERYONE, WITHOUT EXCEPTION.

We take grace seriously here at First. And we're starting to get a reputation for this in the area. WE are the church that welcomes EVERYBODY, no exceptions.

We've had people come to us who have been REJECTED at THEIR church, because they were divorced, or there was an addiction, or SOMETHING. But they ARE welcome HERE.

When we do services at Black Rock and Aitkin Health and Aicota and Golden Horizons, we don't check their Lutheran membership card at the door. EVERYONE is welcome to come to those services, and THEY KNOW it, and many of the people who come AREN'T Lutheran.

Unfortunately, we have some youth in our community who have been told that they're not WELCOME at their church because they are gay or lesbian, but we tell OUR youth that they ARE welcome here, because EVERYONE is welcome, NO exceptions.

Grace matters. We are starting to see people COMING to First that have never gone to ANY church before. People RESPOND to grace, because they don't SEE it ANYWHERE else.

But there are STILL SOME who GRUMBLE. There ALWAYS has been. THREE times in Luke, the religious people GRUMBLE when Jesus welcomes sinners and tax collectors and eats with them. They grumble when Jesus eats with ZACCHAEUS. Because this isn't what people EXPECT Jesus to do. This isn't what any SELF-RESPECTING MESSIAH SHOULD do. "God has STANDARDS," they think, "and if God isn't going to STICK to those standards and PUNISH sinners and REWARD the righteous, then WHAT can we COUNT on?" they think. "I mean, how can God just FORGIVE sin? Or shouldn't forgiveness at LEAST be preceded by genuine REPENTANCE? If God is holy and just, then sin should be PUNISHED, RIGHT? What about God's JUSTICE?" they think.

Yet the God we encounter in Jesus doesn't CARE about OUR sense of justice or righteousness, or any of the OTHER ways we try to order our world. The ONLY thing God cares about is SEEKING out the LOST, and bringing them HOME again. God's love TRUMPS justice, and God's compassion OVERRIDES all of OUR sense of righteousness.

Which can be rather UPSETTING to people – whether to the crowds of Zacchaeus' day or to us. UNTIL, that is, WE are the ones who are down and out, made to feel invisible, whether because of OUR actions, or those of OTHERS, whether because of illness or loss, whether because of our gender or race or age or sexuality or WHATEVER. WHEN we feel on the outside, abandoned, invisible...THAT'S when we need a God who SEES us, and SEEKS AFTER us, and promises to bring us home.

At the heart of the Luther's Reformation was HIS recognition that he had been worshiping the WRONG God. He was taught to FEAR a God of holiness and justice, a God who EXPECTED righteousness, and PUNISHED those who COULDN'T MEET that standard. Luther AGONIZED over God's righteousness, sought it SO DESPERATELY, but he FINALLY realized that righteousness ISN'T the standard God REQUIRES of us, but rather the GIFT God GAVE to us in Christ. Righteousness isn't a REQUIREMENT, but a PROMISE. The God Luther EXPECTED was all about justice; the God he MET in JESUS was all about LOVE. Jesus, it turns out, didn't die to MAKE God forgiving; he died to SHOW us how forgiving God ALREADY is. Little wonder that Luther would later describe meeting this unexpected God by saying it was like having the gates of heaven opened to him.

A pastor recently shared that when one member of her youth group asked her friends what they IMAGINED Jesus THOUGHT of them, the overwhelming answer was DISAPPOINTMENT. They assumed Jesus, that GOD was DISAPPOINTED with them. Isn't that sad? Why did they think that? Because we STILL define God in terms of righteousness, sin, judgement and punishment.

So THIS is the Reformation the church needs TODAY. God is LOVE, and the world needs to HEAR that, and to SEE it. Grace matters. God SURPRISES us. Just like Jesus did with Zacchaeus, God sees us, God accepts us, God loves us, and God brings us home. No exceptions! Amen.