

“Seeing and Being Seen”
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 31, 2010
Luke 19:1-10
Rev. Peter Shidemantle

At my last annual physical exam the usual order of things transpired. First the nurse had me step on the scale to record my weight, and stand up straight so she could measure my height. I track my weight pretty well, so no big surprise there. But when she told me what my height was it came as a shock to me. I don't know why I hadn't noticed before, because surely this happens over a long period of time, but I realized I am almost 2 inches shorter than I was in high school! I've shrunk! I thought I was too young for that. When I shared my surprise with the doctor, he said, yes, it actually starts at about age 35. Things compress, and gravity just does its thing. It's no big deal, but I had always taken some degree of satisfaction from being of at least “average” height – not so any longer. Now I'm “below average.”

Diminished height has a lot to do with the scene in our gospel text this morning. If we learned any Bible stories in Sunday School as children this would have been one of them, the story about Zacchaeus – the one that Fredrick Buechner describes as “a sawed off little social disaster with a big bank account and a crooked job.” To briefly recall the scene, Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector of Jericho, which made him the most hated man in town. We've run into a few tax collectors in Luke's gospel. Jesus had a particular connection to them, in the same way he was connected to prostitutes and other sinners – the people who probably wouldn't feel welcomed in our churches. One way Luke describes them is “the lost.”

Along comes Jesus. The word was out about him. Maybe Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was known for eating and drinking with tax collectors and sinners, or that Levi, one

of his closest followers, was a tax collector. Or, maybe Zacchaeus has heard that Jesus told the rich man to sell all that he had and come follow him, or his statement that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And after all, Levi had to leave his tax booth in order to follow this Jesus.

Zacchaeus had an additional problem. He was short, very short. So it was easy to make fun of him. He wanted to get a look at Jesus, but the crowd was in the way, and they'd never let him through. So he ran ahead of the crowd and perched himself in a tree so he could see Jesus passing by. From what we can tell, he wasn't planning on being seen, let alone actually meeting Jesus. He just wanted to observe, from a safe distance.

Let's stop right there for a moment – freeze the frame of the visual that plays out in our mind's eye. Three things are happening so far. First, Jesus is coming. Second, Zacchaeus wants to see him. He is at least curious, maybe more than that. And third, he is hindered in his efforts by a couple of things: his diminished height; and (the text doesn't say anything about this) the crowd themselves weren't going to do anything to help him see Jesus, maybe even do all they could to prevent him from seeing him, reprobate that he was.

Jesus comes to us. God comes to us in and through him. He comes to meet us. He's not just passing by. He's not just a great figure who passes across the stage of history, leaving a legacy that we might remember and draw inspiration from. It might have been his fame and reputation that drew people out that day, including Zacchaeus – to see what he looked like, to hear what he sounded like. Maybe he'd even perform a miracle. These are genuine curiosities. But his mission was, as Luke tells us, to “seek and save the lost.” Jesus could and did teach and preach to the crowds, but it was the individual meetings and encounters, the relatively few that the gospels convey, that speak most directly to us of this “meeting.”

Each of us comes to this meeting individually as well, even though we may come

together. Maybe we've come because we're curious as to what this Christian stuff is all about, and we manage to find a perch somewhere from which to observe it and appreciate it, to critique it. Wanting to see Jesus is a good thing, "but do we keep him at arm's length? Do we ponder him at a distance, rather than meet him, come to know him, to love him, to serve him, to be changed by him?" (Rev. Amy Richter, "*Sermons That Work*," November 4, 2007)

There are hindrances, fences, even barricades that would keep us from our meeting him as well – some of them erected by ourselves, some put up by others. It is our tendency, is it not, to want to keep our religion "general," rather than "specific" – something to draw upon when we think we need it, to be there to back us up – but it's we who make that call. We'll invite Jesus in when we're ready to do so. And certainly there are plenty of ways that the worlds we are all part of occupy us with all kinds of things that distract us from this most crucial meeting. Many of them are good and important things. Lots of things in life would conspire to keep us from it – our own sinfulness among them.

(Roll the tape.) Jesus sees Zacchaeus up in that tree and said, "Zacchaeus, come down from there. I'm going to stay at your house today." Jesus never passes through without stopping. He doesn't just acknowledge our presence; he enters it. He enters that tax collector's life like he owns the place, and Zacchaeus will never be the same. I love that image that C.S. Lewis uses where he likens Jesus coming into our lives to the renovation of our house. We'd like just a little work done. At first Christ just goes about fixing leaks and repairing what we knew was broken, but pretty soon it gets out of hand and you realize he's got something entirely different in mind. You would have settled for a nice, comfortable, little cottage, but Jesus is constructing a palace, and he intends to live there.

Jesus gives us room to breathe. His love opens up our lives and gives us room to roam around and explore the richness of life that we didn't know, couldn't know, was

possible. Zacchaeus saw Jesus, and more importantly, Jesus saw him. And when their eyes met, Zacchaeus saw himself as Jesus saw him – a beloved child of God, somebody with whom Jesus wants to stay.

If it were up to us maybe we'd have only a casual acquaintance with God. If you've ever seen a movie star or a famous public figure up close, maybe it would be enough to say you had been there when they were passing by. Maybe you even got to shake their hand. My mother-in-law once, years ago, met the famous actor James Garner, who kissed her on the cheek. Lorraine says she's never washed that cheek since. It was enough, and she's lived off that brief encounter all these years. But with Christ it's different. His intentions are more permanent – and even our own unfaithfulness is only an occasion to renew the relationship. He is always ready to come into our house and bless us.

To see Jesus as he sees us. It's the sinners who have the clearest view. The righteous ones grumble about it sometimes, and our grumbling only impedes the work of the kingdom. We assume sometimes that we know who people are, or that we are aware of some condition that would prevent divine renovation. We assume people cannot change. God never makes that assumption, even about ourselves. God always has more expansive plans for us.

Zacchaeus experienced his life enlarged – his inward life refashioned by the word of God, his outward life exploding in generosity. He vows to give half of his goods to the poor, and to give back four times more than he had taken from others. That wouldn't leave him with much, except it would leave him with everything. Grace got into his life. Can't you imagine the few friends Zacchaeus had telling him, "Zacchaeus, you're crazy! You're taking this thing too far!" But it wasn't just him anymore. Jesus lived with him, even after he moved on.

This was Jesus' last stop before heading on to Jerusalem. There he would meet up with the forces that demand for life to stay small, to attend to your own righteousness and keep the sinners away. Tend to your own house, they would say. Keep it neat and tidy, and keep anything out that would mess it up. Jesus was slopping God's grace everywhere. It got into the Temple. It got into politics. It got all over people's lives. It would get him killed – but what a mess they would have on their hands then! The grave couldn't hold him. By God's messy power Christ is still passing through, looking for those who are themselves looking, even if only observing – looking for larger life and struggling against it at the same time – looking for us.

Let your spirits run to see Jesus today. Do whatever you need to do to get a good look, because when he sees you, you won't be there for long. Don't grumble about the grace others might experience. It's your life, my life, Christ wants to break open, today. He wants you to see yourself as God sees you.