

ADDRESSING INEQUALITY

Luke 19:1-10

For all the years of my ordained ministry, I have taught Elder Training to those elected by the congregation to serve. To begin each session, I ask each person to divide up his or her life into three parts, and to think about their awareness of God in any number of events: growing up, going to church, going to school, moving to a new neighborhood, perhaps being baptized as an adult or going through confirmation. If they were married, I ask their thoughts about God at their wedding, and if they divorced, did they think about God then? And what about during an illness or an accident, and even the death of family members or friends? I ask them to describe if they felt like God was close or far away; if they still believed in God or if their belief wavered or went away.

Those are called “Faith Stories” and they are most helpful to formulate and put down on paper. I have found that, “the more you tell your story, the more you’ll have a story to tell.” Without my assignment, many say: “I don’t have a faith story.” But you do! You just need a reason to write or tell your story. Further, I ask those I am training, as I ask you now, if you can name when you turned to Christ from some other path. A number of those I trained said: “It’s hard to tell. I grew up in the church, felt loved and welcomed, and always felt like Jesus was with me.” There are plenty of people with that kind of experience. But at some point, if you joined the church, you declared: “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior!” That is your first day of real Christianity. Before you might have been in a Christian family, but Jesus was always waiting to hear from you: “*Who do you say that I am?*” And he hopes to hear from you, “You are Jesus, my Lord and Savior.” I remember when I first said that. I was thirteen years old in April of 1969. My parents wanted me to

answer baptism questions at “an age of understanding,” so the day I claimed Jesus as my Savior was the day I was baptized at the end of my “Communicants Class.” But there are others who I’ve trained as elders, and others here today, who’ve had a kind of awakening; a “born again” experience. Some said that before their time of decision, they were living oblivious to God or in conflict with God. Some of those people were incarcerated; some were influenced by alcohol or drugs, and some were violent. Others were just non-believers. Then one day they met the Lord, and salvation came to their house! Some can tell me exactly when it happened.

There are examples of both kinds of transformations in history. Some are transformed into Christians over time; and some are changed “in the twinkling of an eye.” Timothy in the Bible was transformed over time. His mother and grandmother were believers in God and had great influence over him. They were faithful Jews just at the time when the story of Jesus began to be shared. Paul said this to young Timothy: “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois, and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you. [2 Timothy 1:5] Paul, on the other hand, found Christ suddenly. He was a rabid persecutor of Christians, actually giving the order to execute one called Stephen. Paul’s name was Saul in those days. But then one day, (in Acts chapter 9), the Lord Jesus appeared to Saul in a “light from heaven,” and Saul fell to the ground. He heard a voice ask: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” From that confrontation, Saul began to change. Astoundingly, instead of persecuting Jesus, he began to call him “Lord.” He was baptized in Jesus’ name, and in one synagogue he visited he began to proclaim: “He is the Son of God.” That’s perhaps the most famous conversion story. But there are others. Did you realize that the Luke passage for today is

another conversion story? Zacchaeus was curious about Jesus, but he was mostly a scorned tax collector. The public believed he took their money and kept huge amounts for himself, so he was most unpopular. And even though history has shown that people were, on average, shorter centuries ago than they are today, Zacchaeus was *much* shorter. The Bible says he was “short in stature.” The song I learned as a child declared that: “Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he!” Hmm. The real point of the story is lost on children in that song, but this is the point. *It’s the story of a man who was lost, but then was found.* Jesus told the little man that climbed up in that sycamore tree: “come on down! For I’m going to *your* house today!” Did Zacchaeus wonder if his house was presentable for guests? Did he stumble down the tree and say “No Jesus, maybe another time?” No. The Bible says “He hurried down and was happy to welcome him!” Something amazing was about to happen! Even so, the crowd grumbled, because they had, rightly or wrongly, named Zacchaeus a “sinner.” But right before their eyes the man who was called a “sinner” started giving away his money! They sat in his home, and all of a sudden, Zacchaeus was everyone’s new best friend; he was giving away money! As Zacchaeus started giving away half of his money, Jesus declared: “Today *salvation* has come to this house!” Did you hear that? He didn’t say justice was done, or the poor were getting money. That wasn’t what Jesus saw. *He saw Zacchaeus’ heart change, and that change, that desire to follow and honor Jesus, saved him. It saves everyone.* The desire, and then the decision, to follow Jesus, saves others besides that “wee little man.” It saved me; it saved our elders and church members. And perhaps it saved you too!

There are so many salvation stories and no two are alike. In Tom Brokaw's well known book *The Greatest Generation*, he included a story from the Rev. Harry Reginald, "Reg" Hammond, who said "God does not bring war upon us. We bring it on ourselves. Man's inhumanity to man is not God-driven." He came to understand the place of God early in his life through the work of his father, a popular Episcopal priest... He came face to face with man's inhumanity to man as a first lieutenant during World War II. "Those lessons remained fresh in Hammond's mind when, more than fifty years later, he was ordained as a priest in the Anglican Orthodox Church at the age of 79, the oldest person ever ordained in that faith." [New York: Random House, 1998, p. 55-56.] God uses young people, middle aged people, and older people to be changed by the Spirit of the living God!

You may recall that when Paul was in Philippi, "A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and was a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul." [Acts 16] And she was baptized. Later in chapter 16, Paul and his colleague Silas were imprisoned because they sent demons out of a possessed woman, and the one controlling the woman could no longer make money off of her fortunetelling. So he reported Paul and Silas to the authorities and they were arrested. While in prison, about midnight, they began to sing hymns to God! Then a great earthquake violently shook the prison, and the doors broke loose and flew open! Chains became unfettered. Did you know that jailers who had prisoners escape on their watch in those days were brutally killed? Thinking his prisoners escaped, that jailer was about to fall on his own sword, But Paul and Silas stopped him, crying out "Don't do that! We are here!" The jailer was so amazed at their faith in God

that he asked how he could have what *they* had. And according to Acts 16:31, Paul told him: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved.”

Do you see the different ways that salvation came to different people’s lives? Sometimes people come to Jesus progressively and slowly, surrounded by faithful and praying parents or grandparents. Others come “in the twinkling of an eye.” If you know Jesus as your Savior, you have a story to tell too! Our Confirmation Class members have written and read their statements of faith already, and they will be able to profess their faith in front of you soon—some next week! “Who is your Lord and Savior?” I’ll ask them. “Jesus Christ is my Lord and Savior” I’ll expect them to say! What a difference when a person dies knowing Jesus, compared to the ones who die without knowing him! What a difference it is when you have a Savior!

Zacchaeus found joy when he gave others half of what he had, and Jesus said that salvation came to his house that day. So many stories, but only one Savior! What’s your story? Remember: the more you tell your story, the more you will have a story to tell. And it will keep grounding you in Jesus as Lord.

Let us pray: “O God: call on who you will, whatever people’s ages, or genders, or places in the world. Lift them up to be light wherever they go, because they have found Jesus as Savior. Amen.

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