

Things Jesus Taught Us (1) - Acceptance

By

Philip Gulley

Read Luke 19:1-10

I was in Florida last weekend leading a retreat for a Southern Baptist Church at a conference center on the beach. **I didn't want to go, but when one is in ministry, one has to be prepared to carry out difficult tasks without complaint, so off I went to the beach.**

I don't get many requests to speak to Southern Baptists. **In fact, now that I think about it, I hadn't ever gotten a request to speak to Southern Baptists, so when they called, I was a little suspicious.** But when I spoke with them, the woman I was talking to laughed and said, "Well, we're Southern Baptists, but we're always in trouble with our denomination." **That made me feel right at home, so I agreed to go.** And I'm so glad I went, because they were wonderful, thoughtful people and I had a great time.

On Saturday evening, I went down to the beach to take a walk and watch the sun set. **After sundown, I sat on the beach.** There was an older woman there, she appeared to be in her early 70's, she wasn't in the group, but we struck up a conversation.

She asked if I lived down there.

No, just visiting.

Oh, family in the area?

No, I'm attending a church retreat, I told her. With the Southern Baptists. I can scarcely believe it.

She smiled. I'm back in the church now, she said.

She'd grown up in the church, she told me, then had grown disillusioned and had left it for many years and just recently had come back into the church community. I asked her why, after all those years away from the church, she'd come back and she said, "I missed Jesus," she said. "And I missed belonging."

I wonder if that's how Zacchaeus felt. **No one likes a tax collector.** And no one liked Zacchaeus. The Jews, because he cheated them, then hid behind the power of Rome. The Romans, because he was a Jew. **So he's catching it from both sides.** Everyone belongs to someone, except Zacchaeus, who has no one or no thing, except his money. And that is a cold comfort.

It's like when you're far from home all by yourself and you're holed up in a hotel room and lonely, you just want to be home, back where you belong, back where you're loved. You're counting down the hours. **For Zacchaeus it was like that all the time.** A stranger everywhere he went. Always by himself. Always alone. He hears about Jesus, in the way that people in small towns hear about others—rumor and gossip. **By then, Jesus had something of a reputation as a healer, so wherever he went people took their children and loved ones to be healed.** Faith was all they had back then. That's why Jesus told people their faith had made them well. It sure wasn't penicillin, because they didn't have it. **You get sick today and antibiotics will heal you whether you have faith or not.** But Jesus had a knack for healing people, or a knack for making people feel as if they were healed. **Sometimes the line between the two is a thin one.** So wherever he went he attracted a crowd, and Jericho was no exception.

Zacchaeus, being of small stature, and probably being elbowed to the back of the crowd, climbed a tree. That represents something of a loss of dignity. **The chief official in town up a tree, people peeking up his robes.** Jesus singles him out. Zeroes in on him. To read the Gospel stories about Jesus is to see a man who had acute sensitivity, a man who had a real gift for being able to pick out the one person most broken, most desperate, most estranged, most alone.

“Zacchaeus,” he called out. “Come down and let's have dinner.” **Now these days, we'll have dinner with just about anybody.** Heck, not two months ago I had lunch with three people who were trying to boot me out of the yearly meeting. **But back then to have dinner with someone meant you had nothing against them.** It meant you belonged with them.

Zacchaeus just about fell out of the tree, so great was his surprise. And his joy. **He made haste and came down and received Jesus joyfully.** In fact, so great was his joy at being accepted, he vowed then and there to give half his stuff to the poor, and pay back four times everything he had stolen. **That's genuine transformation, when you give half your stuff to the poor.** Talk about an extreme makeover.

Now let's note what Jesus did and didn't do, and let's note the sequence. Jesus didn't preach to him. Jesus didn't scold him. Jesus didn't threaten him with hell. Jesus didn't denigrate or belittle him. Jesus didn't tell him the four point plan of salvation. **The only thing Jesus did to Zacchaeus was accept him.** And as soon as Jesus did that, Zacchaeus was healed. That was the sequence. First, Zacchaeus was made to feel as if he belonged, then he lived as if he belonged. **Jesus didn't say, “You do these things, then I'll accept you.”** Jesus accepted him, then Zacchaeus began living acceptably.

John Sheldon Whale, in his book, *Christian Doctrine*, said this: “There are many religions which offer no divine welcome to the sinner until he has ceased to be one. They would first make him righteous, and then bid him welcome to God. But God in Christ first welcomes him, and so makes him penitent and redeems him. The one demands newness of life; the other imparts it.”

So Jesus first accepted Zacchaeus, then Zacchaeus was made new.

The church retreat I attended in Florida was for the Church of the Covenant in Birmingham, Alabama. **You might remember their pastor, Sarah Shelton Jackson, who worshipped with**

us earlier this summer. What you probably don't know is that their church began in 1970 when the First Baptist Church of Birmingham declined membership to a black family and 200 church members left in protest and formed a new church. **Having started with doors wide open, they've seen no reason to close them and to this day accept anyone who comes to them—gays and straights, whites and blacks, rich and poor, alcoholics and teetotalers, the learned and illiterate.** Everyone belonging. Everyone accepted. Everyone loved. Everyone changed.