

"To Save the Lost"
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Fourth Sunday in Lent
Edina Morningside Community Church; March 14, 2021

Luke 18:31-19:10

Then [Jesus] took the twelve aside and said to them, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be handed over to the Gentiles; and he will be mocked and insulted and spat upon. After they have flogged him, they will kill him, and on the third day he will rise again." But they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said.

As he approached Jericho, a blind man was sitting by the roadside begging. When he heard a crowd going by, he asked what was happening. They told him, "Jesus of Nazareth is passing by." Then he shouted, "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!" Those who were in front sternly ordered him to be quiet; but he shouted even more loudly, "Son of David, have mercy on me!" Jesus stood still and ordered the man to be brought to him; and when he came near, he asked him, "What do you want me to do for you?" He said, "Lord, let me see again." Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight; your faith has saved you." Immediately he regained his sight and followed him, glorifying God; and all the people, when they saw it, praised God.

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Once a month, a Catholic laywoman named Deb invites me into her Edina home to unburden my soul. She is my spiritual director, and I've been seeing her for almost ten years. Each month I show up as a tangle of inner conflicts and she holds space for me to share what's on my heart, then mirrors back to me the boundless grace of God's love. She is a chiropractor for my soul, releasing tensions and aligning my spirit so that I can be an open vessel of love for God and others. Her sunlit living room is like church to me, even though there are no hymns and "passing the peace" goes very quickly.

One of the things I rediscover frequently with Deb is my own sense of inadequacy. Perfectionism is a monkey on my back. Because of growing up in a harshly judgmental religious climate, living gay in a world shaped by straight assumptions, and being a young, advantaged white guy with every reason for success, I carry around an undue fear of falling short. I tell myself that if people could see "the real me" the gig would be up, and even God would find me wanting. The irony is not lost on me: someone called to manifest grace and catalyze vulnerable, powerful community needs practice to show up fully as my own authentic self. Perhaps I need this congregation—this space of divine, healing, transformative love—most of all.

I know my own case best, but don't we all have things we're fearful of bringing to light? We ask ourselves, "what will people think if I honestly share how I am?" We fear being discovered as something other than the collection of perfect moments we put out on social media. It's not easy to trust that we can let God see us as we truly are, either. Making matters worse, organized religion has a long history of saying some folks are worthy and others not. "Will I be welcome if they know I'm transgender, if I'm a conservative or a socialist, if I'm unemployed or have mental illness, if I share the problems of

those with great wealth? Will I be welcome?” It’s not easy to be “real” with ourselves, with one another, or even with God. Consequently, we sometimes go through the motions at church, participating with just our heads and not our hearts and souls. We pray for others out of a sense of modesty, when truthfully “it’s me, it’s me O Lord, standing in the need of prayer”. What opportunities for authenticity—for greeting the other as one created in God’s image—pass us by because we’re afraid to show up or welcome another in our full humanity?

How refreshing then, to have this blind man calling out to Jesus. “Son of David, have mercy on *me!*” It’s unusual that a blind beggar would call such attention to himself. Doesn’t he know his place, to be silent and grateful for whatever charity comes his way? But no, he insists on calling attention to his true self, asking for mercy and healing. “God, help me! I’m blind. Son of David, have mercy on me!” His clamor, even when others try to shush him, stops Jesus in his journey to Jerusalem. “What do you want me to do for you?” the Savior asks. “Lord, let me see again.” Here is a man unafraid of naming his limitations, not letting himself be silenced by the unseen crowd of judgment. “Receive your sight,” Jesus says, “your faith has saved you.” The disciples who have traveled with Jesus for so long are blind to his costly and vulnerable way, yet the one least expected to perceive the truth is given sight. What might we learn from him about authenticity and healing?

Then there’s Zaccheus, another man whose failings are on display for everyone. He falls short of righteousness in the eyes of his peers because his job has him in tension with the faithful mandates of justice and love. Remember that in Jesus’ time tax collectors had paid a flat fee to Roman authorities for the license to collect taxes from their own people. They are the anti-Robin Hoods, who take from the poor and give to the rich. And Zacchaeus is a *chief* tax collector, the CEO of a tax-collection franchise business. One doesn’t make friends in Zacchaeus’ line of work because he’s always hitting up his neighbors for more money. So when Zacchaeus goes to see Jesus on the road in Jericho, people avoid him. When he tries to push through the crowd to get a better look, bystanders block him at every turn. When he climbs into that sycamore tree to get a better view, those who notice him there would almost prefer that he fall right out of that tree, thank you very much.

Jesus looks on him with different eyes, however. Just as he stopped for the blind man, Jesus calls out here to Zaccheus. “Come out of that tree, for I am to stay with *you* tonight.” The Son of God incarnate regards this notorious sinner with love at first sight. Perhaps he knew already that Zacchaeus would respond with eagerness; would commit to sharing with the poor and making restitution for his unclean privilege. But I believe that Zaccheus’ righteous response isn’t what caught Jesus’ eye. Jesus looked on *everyone* this way, first seeing them through the lens of divine love. He shows not the harsh, piercing “eye of Sauron” from Lord of the Rings, but the visual embrace with which a grandmother regards her dearest grandchild.

God sees all of us—and all of *each* of us—in this way. “The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost”, Jesus says. What lostness do you carry that God alone can see and heal? What blindedness yearns for new eyes? Where do you need Jesus to look on you with love at first sight?

Ann Porter has composed [a poem called “Susanna”](#) that expresses this divine care. She writes:

*Nobody in the hospital
Could tell the age
Of the old woman who
Was called Susanna*

*I knew she spoke some English
And that she was an immigrant*

*Out of a little country
Trampled by armies*

*Because she had no visitors
I would stop by to see her
But she was always sleeping*

*All I could do
Was to get out her comb
And carefully untangle
The tangles in her hair
One day I was beside her
When she woke up
Opening small dark eyes
Of a surprising clearness*

*She looked at me and said
You want to know the truth?
I answered Yes*

*She said it's something that
My mother told me*

*There's not a single inch
Of our whole body
That the Lord does not love*

She then went back to sleep

Beloved of God, there's not a single inch of you or me that the Lord does not love. There's not a single inch of this whole *church* body, this whole *earth* body, that the Lord does not love. There is much that needs changing, but that starts in a place of grace and not judgment. Today feel God's tender hands on the unkempt or unvisited places in the soul, carefully untangling, healing and mending you even in unconscious ways. Be loved beyond your wildest imaginings, by the embrace of Jesus Christ. God meets us just as we are, then frees us—like Zaccheus—to do our part in healing the whole community. Let us pray: *O Boundless Grace, help us to know and show the depth of your care, looking upon us and all the world with love at first sight. Amen.*