

**SAINTS AND SINNERS**  
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November 3, 2013  
All Saints' Sunday  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

**Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4**

*O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Why do you make me see injustice, destruction and violence everywhere? O LORD, how long, how long?*

**Luke 19:1-10**

*Half of my possessions I will give to the poor; if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.*

\* \* \*

*Jesus was a Capricorn, he ate organic foods.  
He believed in love and peace and never wore no shoes.  
Long hair, beard and sandals and a funky bunch of friends.  
Reckon they'd just nail him up if He come down again.*

*'Cos everybody's got to have somebody to look down on.  
Who they can feel better than at anytime they please.  
Someone doin' somethin' dirty, decent folks can frown on.  
If you can't find nobody else, then help yourself to me.*

[Kris Kristofferson]

The gospel lesson this morning is about a dirty, little man that decent folks looked down on. His name was Zacchaeus. And this is his story. (Luke 19:1-10)

*Once upon a time Jesus was walking through Jericho where lived the chief tax collector named Zacchaeus.*

By the way, tax collection then wasn't like tax collection now. It went like this. The Roman Empire occupied Palestine and required each district to pay a lump sum. A local resident got the job and guaranteed the occupying forces their payment. Here's the rub: anything over and above that lump sum, tax collectors could keep. And so they took all they could with the fearsome support of Roman troops. The Jewish people hated the Romans. They hated tax collectors even more for they were loathsome traitors.

Zacchaeus was the *chief* of tax collectors. And he was very, very rich.

*Jesus was coming to town and Zacchaeus wanted to get a look, but the crowd was thick and he was short. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree so he could get a look at Jesus as he passed by. When Jesus came to that tree, he stopped, looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, get down from there; I must stay at your house today."*

*Zacchaeus flew down that tree and happily welcomed Jesus into his house and shut the door. Meanwhile the crowd turned sour and grumbled, saying, "Can you believe it, Jesus has gone to be the guest of that horrible sinner."*

And that "grumble" is where I come into the story. And maybe that's where you come in. For, let's admit it: there are certain people we just do not want to be associated with. They're dirty. They're sleazy. They're scum. They're demons beyond hope and help. And so we have rightly and righteously excluded them from our company and from our circle of regard.

Maybe it's someone who once belonged to your family. Maybe it's someone at work or in your club or in this church. Maybe it's the CEO of JP Morgan, or Walmart, or

Monsanto. Maybe it's the president of the NRA, or ACLU, or the Tea Party or any of its members. Maybe it's President Obama, or the government, the military, the UN, or Al Qaeda. So many people and groups to demonize.

One of my heroes is the late Will Campbell, author of the book, *Brother to a Dragonfly*. Campbell was a southern Baptist minister, a long time civil rights advocate and a maverick. He began attending KKK meetings and befriending some its members. He even visited the assassin of Martin Luther King, James Earl Ray, in prison. And for those things many of his liberal companions disowned him. To which Campbell replied: *I'm pretty sure Jesus didn't die just for nice people like you!*

Which brings me back to Kristofferson's song. Second verse.

*Egg Head's cousin Red Neck's cussin' hippies for their hair.  
Others laugh at straights who laugh at freaks who laugh at squares.  
Some folks hate the whites who hate the blacks who hate the clan.  
Most of us hate anything that we don't understand.*

Zacchaeus was rich and powerful. Everybody looked down on him as a dirty, rotten scoundrel beyond hope and help. People just couldn't trust him to keep his hand out of their pockets or his nose out of their business.

It's true, Zacchaeus bled his own people, but it's also true, he had done nothing wrong—*legally* speaking. But legal and moral are two different things. Many things are *legal* that just aren't *right*—as our own NSA is beginning to find out.

Zacchaeus had done wicked things in the name of the law with the backing of the most powerful military in the world. He perverted justice. He betrayed his own people. But, you know, Jesus loved Zacchaeus. And he loved him too much to leave him as he was, up a tree, nowhere to go.

To be sure, Jesus didn't love the things Zacchaeus was doing to people. Jesus couldn't condone policies and practices that hurt the poor. But Jesus loved the man. Jesus saw what others missed. Others might demonize and dismiss such people. Others might look down on them. Jesus would not. Compassion never does.

And if that's all we take from the lesson this morning, that would be enough.

Be kind to others even if you can't condone the things they say or do.

It's OK to argue and disagree. It's OK to criticize. It's not OK to demonize.

Give people the same benefit of the doubt you want for yourself. Let's get off our high horse and walk a mile in their shoes. Learn to listen. Practice hospitality. Let's understand another's fears before we blithely disregard them as Neanderthals or mean-spirited or narrow minded or rednecks or freaks.

Regard others as you would have others regard you.

Jesus listened to Zacchaeus and I'm guessing Zacchaeus listened to Jesus. And somewhere in those listening moments Zacchaeus saw that he had indeed treated people unkindly and unfairly. In that moment of grace, Zacchaeus had a choice and he took it. He turned away from the law of greed and toward the law of love. Which is: Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.

Of course, it's one thing to feel sorry and apologize. It's something else to make amends.

Here now is the conclusion of the gospel lesson.

*Zacchaeus opened the door, walked out and stood before the people and said, "Half of my possessions I will give to the poor; if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four*

*times as much." And then Jesus said, "Today salvation has come to this house, for this man is our brother."*

A door had opened for Zacchaeus, just as a door may be opening for you this morning, an opening, which is to say, an invitation from the Beloved to change what you've been and the way you've been treating others. A door is opening and it just might be the door that leads you home.

I've heard many people say: *I'm no saint*. I have never once heard a person say, *I'm no sinner*.

I'm guessing that's because we've all missed the mark time and time again. And we know it.

No one has the right to look down on anyone else. We've all hurt others. We've all turned our back on love. We've all gone astray and lost our way. We don't need another slap in the face. What we need is a hand to hold. We've had enough doors slammed in our faces. We need someone to gather us all in.

*How long, O Lord, how long?*