

*Gracious God, let us hear once more your assurance of salvation, the hope for healing and wholeness that you offer to us and to the world. Grant us courage to accept your call and fulfill it with joy. Amen.*

June 9, 2019 – Luke 19:1-9a

### **“Get a Little Closer”**

On the altar you see a quilt that a friend recently made for me and Mark. If you get a little closer, you can see that it’s a patchwork of flower-patterned fabric. She posted on Facebook, “This ‘little flower garden’ will be delivered to its new family of ‘gardeners’ this weekend – Mark Barnett, who gardens with plants and Charley Garrison who tends to the garden of humanity in his congregation.” I thought that was touching, but you can’t really appreciate the words until you get closer to the quilt and see the patterns.

And so, one Saturday over brunch at Café Cappuccino, she gave me this beautiful gift. But it was also at that brunch, while consuming copious amounts of biscuits and gravy, that I received even more details about the quilt. You see, my friend has received wounds that reach far back into her life and deep within her soul. And she has found that making quilts is therapeutic and healing. And I never would have known the underlying story of this quilt had I not gotten close enough to spend some time with her over a meal. I suspect that in her sharing of her own story, a bit of spiritual healing might have taken place for her, and I was honored to participate in that healing.

The same sort of thing is taking place in this morning’s Gospel story, in which we are introduced to someone who has heard that Jesus has come to town, and like everyone else, he wants to get a glimpse of this miracle-working celebrity. Unsatisfied with any rumor or hearsay about Jesus, he wants to get a little closer and see him for himself. But the problem is he’s short. So short, in fact, that he apparently can’t even see above the heads of the crowd.

If I imagine what it might have been like for him, I picture him enduring laughter and jokes as a youth, maybe even beatings. And as he grew older, but not taller, I imagine his stature as the butt of many jokes, people snickering as he passed by, maybe even whispering to each other that it was God’s punishment for an unconfessed sin.

And if you were to spend some time with Zacchaeus, if you were to get a little closer to him, you might have learned that he, like my quilt-making friend, indeed like all of us if we are willing to admit it, bore spiritual wounds – his from these experiences that reached back into his life. But he had discovered a way to retaliate against his tormentors through his occupation as the chief tax collector of the city.

Tax collectors accumulated their wealth by demanding tax payments in excess of what Rome required and keeping the difference. And consequently, they were hated by other Jews because of their greed and their collaboration with the Roman Empire.

Laugh at him, would they? All he needed to do was raise the tax and put the squeeze on any culprit who thought they could get away with making fun of him. Now, who had the last laugh?

So here we have a spiritually wounded, but powerful person running ahead of the crowds, making his way to a tree under which Jesus was expected to be walking. If he could make his way up the tree, he would get as good a look at Jesus as anyone in the crowd. Maybe even better.

So with Jesus’ approach, Zacchaeus couldn’t have been more pleased with himself. Everything was going according to plan until Jesus arrived at the tree, looked up, and threw the spotlight on this wealthy man of power perched on a tree limb. And I can’t help but think how all the laughter and jokes and beatings he had endured all his life came roaring back in a rush, threatening to engulf him in shame, as folks looked up into the tree to find to their amusement, not a mischief-making teenager hanging from one of the limbs, but instead, the mighty and powerful Zacchaeus looking not quite so mighty and powerful at the moment.

But that’s not what Jesus saw. Jesus saw a spiritually wounded man who wanted nothing more

than to be accepted and included. Someone who ached for a sense of belonging. And so to everyone's astonishment, Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus's home for a conversation over a meal, possibly a plate of biscuits and gravy. And over that dinner conversation, I imagine Jesus teasing out from Zacchaeus all the pain and suffering he had endured throughout his life. And it was during that time with Jesus that Zacchaeus was transformed into a man of generosity, pledging to bless others with his wealth, and Jesus proclaiming that salvation or healing had come to Zacchaeus.

Over the last couple weeks, we've focused on generosity, not as an obligation, but instead, as a source of joy. And joy is something that we all crave. Not only you and me, but everyone. The elusiveness of a joy-filled life is evident by the number of books on the market – books like, "Finding Joy," "Joy on Demand," "The Happiness Makeover" and "Choose Joy: The Happiness that Comes from Within." There are TED talks online and YouTube videos, such as those entitled, "Where Joy Hides and How to Find It," "How to Notice and Build Joy in Your Lives," and "Unleash Your Joy Potential."

These are all nice and they might even prove beneficial, but hoping to finally acquire joy by reading a book is like looking at the quilt from a distance without any knowledge of its backstory. Watching a video about joy is like catching a glimpse of Jesus from a tree limb instead of having a one-on-one conversation with him. In order to really experience joy, in order to appreciate its benefits in your life, you need to get a little closer than reading a book or watching a video. In short, you need to place into action what those books and videos say. Limiting yourself to simply reading or listening about it won't accomplish much at all.

Over the last couple weeks, you've heard some very moving and inspiring testimonials from Sue and Anise about how generosity has transformed their lives, and you have heard a couple sermons about the joy of generosity. But unless you actually do something, you can't expect to experience the transformation we've been talking about. You can appreciate the good things that are happening in the church you declare yourself to be a part of, but until you actually get a little closer and contribute to those good things, you are unlikely to experience the joy we've been speaking of. Until you give up some of your time in prayer for our church's mission and connect with others on a regular basis on Sunday mornings, until you join forces with others in ministry, until you add your meager offering to all of the other meager offerings that together impact lives locally and abroad – in short, until you get closer than just listening to others talk about the joy of generosity, you won't experience the transformation that comes from the open-hearted giving of yourself and your resources.

I'm not telling you that you have to do this. Giving is not compulsory at this church. I understand how life circumstances can limit our giving ability. And I also understand how fear can hold us back. All I'm saying is joy is a byproduct of generosity. And joy transforms lives. So if you want to experience transformation in your life, then look for the blessings in your life – those places where you have a bit more than someone else. Maybe it's in your good health, maybe it's in your free time, maybe it's in your income, maybe it's in your skills and talents. Find those areas where you have been blessed, and use those blessings to bless others. Do it, and your life will be transformed. Do it, and you will experience healing and salvation. Do it, and you will know joy.

My friend learned that generously producing quilts for her friends brings healing in her life. Zacchaeus learned that giving away money brought more healing to his life than accumulating it did. Both were transformed from broken people into joyful people. If you're looking for that sort of transformation, you might try giving generosity a chance while drawing closer to others who are doing the same thing. Amen.