

November 2019 – Year C

Twenty-First Sunday in Pentecost (Proper 31) – November 3

Luke 19:1-10 (Zachaeus the Tax Collector)

- We see some of the major themes of Luke's Gospel in this story. Jesus constantly associates with "sinners". Jesus calls people to repentance and trust in God, which leads to salvation. Jesus also warns about the dangers associated with the love of wealth.
- This story should be read in the context of the previous chapter (Ch 18) where we find the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax-Collector (18:9-14). In that parable we find two men who go to the temple to pray, a self-righteous Pharisee and a sinful, but humble, tax-collector. The self-righteous man prays in gratitude that he is not like other sinful people. He pronounces his good deeds before God, which go beyond the requirements of the law. He looks down on the tax-collector (praying nearby) with contempt. He doesn't see that the root of all sin, pride, has taken hold in his heart and has grown into contempt.
- The tax collector knows there isn't anything in his life he can brag about. Tax-collectors were crooks and traitors who worked for an occupying army. Often they were already wealthy and they gouged the poor to make themselves even more rich and powerful using the authority of their Roman oppressors. They were allowed to skim as much as they wanted off the top as long as Rome got their share. Anything extra the tax collector was free to have. It was a rotten system that led to all kinds of corruption. This particular tax-collector, however, seems to have had a change of heart. In repentance and humility he asks for God's mercy. The Tax collector calls in genuine humility for God's mercy. And that is the prerequisite to receiving it. Unless you genuinely realize your need for atonement you don't have the ability to receive it. Unless you realize that your relationship with God and the people around you is messed up, you can't really ask for and receive help from God. Humility is the seed of all virtue. With humility planted in your heart you are bound to be led into a transformed life. This is the one Jesus says leaves the temple justified.
- As we read about Zacchaeus, we should also have in our mind and the story about the Rich Ruler (18:18-34). The rich ruler comes to Jesus with a question about how to inherit eternal life. They have a conversation about the ten commandments, which the ruler says he diligently keeps. (Though, there is some argument about how much attention we should give to the lack of a mention about coveting.) Jesus says he lacks one thing and instructs him to sell everything and give the money to the poor and then to follow him. The ruler walks away sad, unwilling to part with his wealth.
- In contrast, Zacchaeus is willing to part with his wealth. He is the repentant and humble tax-collector who has asked for God's mercy. His prayer for mercy has been answered by the presence of Jesus and his life has now been changed. His repentance isn't merely an inward experience. It also has an outward expression. This rich man is willing to give away his wealth because he has found something much more valuable than money couldn't give him. Like the humble tax collector who left the temple justified, so Zacchaeus receives salvation.

- It is worth noting that Jericho is a big city and so it is likely to produce a lot of revenue in taxes. He is also a “chief” tax collector, which probably means he had other tax collectors working under him.
- An interesting question to ask is “what draws Zacchaeus to Jesus?” Is it just curiosity? Or is this evidence that his wealth wasn’t actually making him happy? Does he sense something in Jesus? There seems to be an eagerness in him. He runs ahead of the procession and climbs a tree- both are at a cost to his personal dignity.
- What is it about Zacchaeus that catches Jesus’ attention? Jesus seems impressed when people work hard to reach him- like digging a hole in a ceiling to lower a sick friend down to him, or when a sick woman risks public disgrace merely to touch him.
- Going into the home of a tax-collector and eating with them was a breach of the table-fellowship tradition. Table fellowship is hard for us to understand in the modern West. Out of friendliness and politeness we will eat with almost anyone. In Jesus’ culture, to eat with someone was to be identified with them. It implied that you approved of them and their way of life and that you were like them. Jesus constantly violated the principle of Table-Fellowship as he drew close to those who were considered “sinners” (5:29; 7:29; 15:1). Jesus didn’t seem to feel that he could be defiled by being with “sinners”. Instead he believed his presence would bring wholeness to those who were sick.
- Zacchaeus is transformed by his encounter with Jesus. Dedication to Jesus results in justice and generosity. His life reflects his confession. He puts his money where his mouth is. He is willing to make amends as a part of his confession (Exodus 22:1). It’s not just between him and Jesus- it includes his relationship with others. This wholistic transformation- believing in Jesus, repentance, life change- causes Jesus to declare “salvation” over Zacchaeus’ house. This is the end result of the doctor visiting the sick (Lk 5:31), and the shepherd returning with the lost sheep (Lk 15:4-5).
- In the Gospel of Luke Jesus highlights the dangers of the love of and accumulation of wealth. This is especially true when it is at the cost of a neighbour. No doubt, not all of Zacchaeus’ wealth was taken from wealthy neighbours. Surely some was skimmed off the top of many of the taxes of the poor. Wealth is a responsibility and should be used to create justice. Jesus often sides with the poor as they are particularly vulnerable to exploitation. See Luke 1:53, 6:24, 12:13-21, 16:1-13; 16:19-31; 14:12-14.

Twenty-Second Sunday in Pentecost (Proper 32) – November 10

Luke 20:27-38 (Marriage and the Resurrection)

- The Pharisees and Sadducees disagreed about the resurrection. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection of the dead or in angels. It is thought that the Sadducees places more emphasis on the Torah (the first 5 books of the Bible) where it is harder to find evidence for the resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees believed in both the resurrection of the dead and angels. They are believed to have recognized the authority of later books (like Daniel) as well as in oral tradition.
- The Sadducees, who were very connected to the temple and the political elite, quickly diminished after the destruction of the temple in 70 AD by the Romans. The destruction of the temple may have been seen as proof of Christ’s teaching as being superior against the Sadducees’ beliefs.

- On the issue of the resurrection of the dead, Jesus sides with the Pharisees against the Sadducees. While there is much cross-over between Christians and Pharisees, they soon became rivals.
- Contrary to common belief, the resurrection being discussed is not a disembodied life as a spirit in heaven. In the first century, they are discussing the literal resurrection of bodies to face judgement.
- The Sadducees' question is supposed to be an impossible question that proves the irrational nature of belief in the resurrection of the dead based on the laws of Torah (Deut 25:5-10). There is a commandment whereby a brother-in-law is required to perpetuate his brother's name by marrying his brother's widow if he dies without producing a child. Following the law with seven brothers dying one after another without producing a child means the wife would have been a wife to all seven brothers. The resurrection of the dead produces a legal problem in the relationship between the woman and the brothers. It is implied that obedience to the Torah would not produce that kind of conundrum.
- Jesus' solution is found in the difference between this age and the age to come. The question asked doesn't bother Jesus because the resurrected body is transformed in such a way that reproduction is no longer necessary. The perpetuation of a family line by having children is no longer needed, and therefore marriage, as presently understood, is not a part of that new age. It was also a belief at the time that angels did not marry because they don't need to procreate. Resurrected humans would have a nature like that of angels.
- There is a pastoral concern to be aware of here. There are many widows and widowers in our congregations, and part of their hope for life after death includes a hope of reunification with their deceased partners. The idea that they won't be married anymore might be horrifying. An idea I have found helpful is that life with God is not about disconnecting people from each other. In fact, life with God will be about an increased love towards others, though relationships will no doubt change in their nature as we learn to live in a new reality.
- In verses 37 and 38 Jesus shows evidence from the Torah of the dead being alive before God in that God is the Lord of the living and is the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. To avoid contradiction the Sadducees would have to find a way to make both those statements work together- God is "Lord of the living" and the "God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob". For Jesus, they are alive before God.

Twenty-Third Sunday in Pentecost (Proper 33) – November 17

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 (Effort and Idleness)

- Paul is describing members who are letting the group down. The church is like a dance. There are many parts to play and it works best when all the parts are played well. Paul is warning the Thessalonian church about those who are "living in idleness".
- The word in the original Greek has a couple meanings. It could refer to a person who is slacking off, but it can also refer to someone who is disorderly. Those meanings bleed into each other. If someone is refusing to play their part they are slacking off on their duties and causing disorder because the group isn't able to function well if everyone isn't doing their part. The whole dance is disturbed if one of the dancers isn't dancing well.

- The early church functioned very much like a Mediterranean family. It was a large household and everyone was expected to contribute to the life of the family. It seems like in the Thessalonian church had a few members that were taking advantage of the generosity of the community. These are not people who are unable to contribute because of age or illness. Paul is speaking about people who are able, but unwilling. They were happy to take but not to contribute.
- Paul states that he and his companions set an example for them by working hard and not expecting anyone to support them, even though it was their right to expect to be supported. Paul and his companions went beyond the expectations in order to set an example for them.
- These idle people also seem to have been busybodies- spreading gossip and poking their nose into other people's business. The overall effect of these idle people is that they breed disorder in the church. The bar becomes lowered. If someone is slacking and causing disorder then what they are doing it might spread through the community. Others might see that as the example to follow and the community is weakened. Others learn not to take their duties seriously. The community is then weakened.
- No doubt many of us have been confronted by people who are happy to take advantage of us. We are especially vulnerable as Christians because we are supposed to be nice, and generous, and that can make us easy marks for those who are looking to take advantage of us. Paul's advice means that we are allowed to be wise when dealing with people. We are allowed to have boundaries so that we will not be manipulated. Paul is not trying to be cruel in telling the Thessalonians to keep away from those who are idle and causing disorder. Paul is trying to protect the Thessalonians by protecting the community.
- Keeping away from the troublemakers might actually help them to realize what they are doing. Paul says that anyone who is unwilling to work should not eat. In the early church it was very common to have a common purse to care for the needy. No doubt some just saw an easy meal. Paul says that those who can work, but don't shouldn't be allowed to draw from the common purse. In reality they are stealing from those who truly need it. In a real sense, they are putting the health of their own souls at stake.
- What Paul is talking about is church discipline. It means that there is a certain standard that we agree upon. It means that there are expectations to being a part of a community. There are expectations about how we treat each other and expectations about how we will function in the world.
- Church discipline has become a very nasty concept to our minds. We think of heresy trials and shunning and other kinds of mistreatment and cruelty. The opposite extreme is also unacceptable though. The opposite means there are no expectations for the Christian community. No expectations about how we treat each other, or how we act in the world. That may lead to a church full of disorder. It leads to a church full of hypocrisy where we claim to follow Christ, but our actions and lives don't show it.
- While Paul's words might seem harsh, we must also see that he is trying to protect the community from those who would harm it. For us to be humble we should also on occasion question our own effort in the community. How much do we receive and how much do we contribute. In what ways are we contributing to Christ's work in the world?
- What if these slackers were the norm in the church? What would happen to the church? What if everyone was drawing on the church's resources but not contributing to the church? What would happen to the slackers? The result is that if the church was feeding them that they would go hungry. Paul is helping them to feel the consequences of their actions

- What is this community that Paul is protecting? This community is not a club or a hobby for those involved. This community is the body of Christ. It is the hope that there can be a new way of being human. Church is also the place where I learn to be a new kind of human being. It is where we gather as a variety of different kinds of people who would otherwise not really be with each other and we learn to be a family. I need church because I need to learn to be patient and there are all kinds of opportunities to learn that in the church. I need church because I need to know what it is like to be deeply loved and it is amazing to experience people loving you like you are family. I need the church because I need to be made aware of ways that I need to grow. In church I learn to not always have things my way because the point of church is not me. The point of the church is God, and the family God has created to be a part of his mission in the world.
- It is by being a part of the church that I learn to be the kind of person God is hoping I will become. ... What Paul is concerned about is that the community could get watered down by people who just want to greedily consume the church's resources but not offer anything back. This sows all kinds of destructive seeds into the community. This community is too important to allow it to be destroyed by a few selfish members.

Reign of Christ (Last Sunday after Pentecost - Proper 34) – November 24

Colossians 1:11-20 (Primacy of Christ)

- Some couldn't understand how Jesus could be a divine being and be human being. We can hardly fault them for struggling with that thought. Some wanted him to be 100% human, and not God at all. They could accept him as a teacher, or a prophet. Others wanted him to be 100% God, and not human at all. To them there was something very unholy about human flesh. It's messy. Humans have to go to the bathroom, which isn't very dignified for God. So, they started to say that Jesus only looked human. It was as if Jesus was a holographic projection sent from heaven with a message for us. There were also those that believed Jesus was a divine being, but not God. Jesus was an incarnated being. A powerful being, but a created being. There was a point in time when The Son did not exist. He was a creature created by God, and therefore is not God.
- Most Christians agreed that Jesus was God, but the difficulty was in understanding exactly how that worked - how exactly is Jesus God? Was Jesus 50% human and 50% God? Was he some kind of hybrid? Others started to wonder in what way Jesus was God and they imagined that God the Father left heaven and became incarnate in the baby Jesus. But some started to ask, who kept everything in existence while the baby Jesus was sleeping. And when Jesus died on the cross, who kept the universe going? Did God really die and suffer of the cross? And who was Jesus praying to? What was Jesus speaking about when he spoke about the Father?
- Eventually the Church decided that Jesus was 100% human and 100% divine, but they were still a little unclear about how exactly that worked.
- This is a difficult subject. However, these beliefs mattered and still matter. What is at stake is how salvation works, if we pray to and worship Jesus, and whether we can trust Jesus or not. That's why they struggled so hard with these issues.
- Walk down the street and ask people who Jesus is and all these opinions are still present in our world. There are those who still believe Jesus was just a human teacher, nothing more. There are those who believe that he came from some distant planet to teach us. There are those who believe that Jesus was just a vision received while someone was on hallucinogenic drugs. There are some who knock on our door who believe that Jesus is the incarnate Archangel Michael, a

creature of God, but not God. There are others who knock on our door who believe that Jesus is a god on his own, separate from God the Father.

- These positions don't make sense in terms of the Church's historical experience of Jesus. Each time the Church heard an idea they kept coming back to the scriptures that were handed on to them. They kept going back to what they were taught by those who were with Jesus. This didn't mean that all Jesus' mysteries were explained. What the Church was trying to do was set boundaries on how we talk about Jesus. At what point do we stop talking about Jesus of Nazareth? Well, when we deny that Jesus was a human being we have stopped talking about Jesus and are really talking about something else. When we deny that Jesus was God we have stopped talking about Jesus of Nazareth and are really talking about something else.
- One of the places in Scripture that was returned to again and again during these controversies was this Colossians reading. Some scholars believe that 1:15-20 was an early Christian hymn that Paul incorporated into his letter to the people of Colossae. The letter is believed to have been written in the 50's or early 60's. We're talking 20 or 30 years after Jesus had died. That means this hymn is dated even earlier than that.
- He is "the image of the invisible God". Imagine that being said about a human being. "by him all things were created". Close your eyes, now think of something... Jesus created that. All the atoms and energies of this universe- Jesus created it all. But not only did he create everything, everything was created FOR him. It's hard to even imagine what that means. Okay close your eyes and imagine something ... that was made for Jesus. And then we read that "in him all things hold together". Okay so close your eyes and imagine something... you know why that thing doesn't stop existing? Jesus. Go back to the beginning and Jesus is there. Go to the end where all creation is heading and Jesus is there. And right now everything is being held together by him. ...
- "God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Jesus]". All God's fullness is in Jesus. This is not something that can be said of someone who was only a human being. That can't even be said of an angel. No angel has all God's fullness. This is a difficult place to use words. If Quantum Mechanics is difficult to grasp, then how much more the nature of God.
- Jesus is 100% God. He shares God's nature with the Father and the Spirit. He is fully God- along with the Father and the Spirit. Jesus is also 100% human. God the son took onto Himself human nature. A human being has been incorporated into who God is. And because he is both fully God and human, he has brought broken humanity back into relationship with God through his life, death on the cross, resurrection, and ascension. He is fully human, so he understands your struggles. He understands how difficult life can be. As one of us he resisted Sin and defeated evil. That is a human victory as well as a victory of God. This means we can benefit from the spoils of that battle.
- If Jesus is God then we can pray to Jesus and worship him without being polytheists. If Jesus is God then God sacrificed himself on the cross for us, taking on the full power of evil to show His love for us. He didn't send one of his poor creatures to endure the cross for our sake. He endured it for us. If Jesus was God, then God has reached down to us to pull us up. If Jesus is God, then we can trust what he says about God, because he is God. He is God himself revealing himself to us. In Christ, God did for us what we could never do for ourselves.
- As hard as it can be to understand Jesus, we can rest assured that we are not saved by understanding every intricate detail of who Christ is. He sees us longing after him. and we long after him because he is the "image of the invisible God". In seeing him we have seen God. Ultimately, our salvation rests in the fact that Christ knows who we are. And because it depends on him we can grasp onto him with a childlike faith.