

April 2, 2017 – Lent 5

“Mercy Received, Mercy Given” © - Rev. Seth D. Jones

Scripture: Luke 18:31-19:10

Luke tells us that, after Jesus has described, again, why he is going to Jerusalem, the disciples “understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was being said” (Lk 18:34). I think, whenever we see phrases like this in Scripture, we are being told that the upcoming story or stories are not as they appear on the surface.

And sure enough, we get a confirmation of this when we come upon the blind man outside of Jericho. The blind man does not want Jesus to pass by without healing him. He yells out and the crowd tells him to show some respect and shut up, which merely encourages the blind man to yell louder for Jesus. I like the blind man. He does exactly the opposite of what the crowd asks him to do. Then Jesus asks a question all of us need to hear: “What do you want me to do for you?” What, indeed, do you want Jesus to do for you? In this case, the blind man wants his vision back, and it is granted because of his faith. Faith in what? That Jesus will respond directly to what we ask of him.

It sounds selfish, doesn't it? Surely, we aren't supposed to pray for things we want and outcomes we hope for, because that is self-centered and not concerned about the needs of others. Jesus says exactly the opposite here. Things are not as they appear. Even acts of mercy and compassion may not be what they appear to be.

A few years ago, the World Ship came to Rockland. The World Ship is a residential cruise ship for the super-rich. It has 165 cabins, which people purchase for as little as \$850,000 for a studio cabin to \$7.5 million for a 3-bedroom suite. Once you have purchased your cabin/condo, you will pay about 10% per year of the purchase price for ship services and maintenance. The World Ship does not enter into harbors so it can always stay in international waters, and thus avoid taxes around the world. The people who live on the ship decide where the ship goes from one year to the next. It is an endless world cruise on the greatest luxury liner ever built.

While the World Ship was in Rockland, I had questions and concerns. As a well-trained theologian and minister, I have had a lot of education in worldviews that are, finally, antagonistic toward the rich. Kate and I went down to Mechanic's Harbor to see if we could recognize anyone who came off the ship. As soon as I saw some of the people, though, I was struck by a simple fact. The people who live on the World Ship are no different from anyone else. They were nervous about the small crowd that had gathered to watch them. They were trying to get to places with good internet to communicate with family members and friends. Their concerns were not a whole lot different from any of our concerns.

After that realization, I immediately asked another question, “Does the World Ship need a chaplain or minister?” I am sure it wouldn't hurt, but that question leads to a better question, “How do we minister to the wealthy? How do we talk about Jesus to the wealthy?”

See, last week, we dealt with the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus. The Rich Man was in bad shape, and we talked about how not to be like the Rich Man, about how to show mercy to the suffering and the impoverished. Many of you may have walked away with a sense that part of the problem with the Rich Man was that he was very wealthy, that wealth is the problem in and of itself. It is pretty easy to judge the wealthy merely for having wealth when we are looking at Jesus and the Prophets; or rather, when we think we are seeing what we think Jesus and the Prophets are telling us.

But remember, today's reading begins with a warning – the things you are seeing when we walk along with Jesus are not as they appear. And so we are presented with Zacchaeus this morning. Zacchaeus, whose name means 'innocent' or 'righteous' by the way, who is a very wealthy leader among tax collectors, wants to see Jesus, but can't because he can't see over the crowd. Here is an instance where the words themselves suggest things are not as they appear.

Before I get into issues with the words, take a moment and imagine what Jesus looks like to you. What comes to your mind? Many of us grew up with a blond, blue-eyed, strong, white Jesus. Which is funny because in this region of the world, even today, the vast majority of men are not like that at all. Why would Jesus be like that? Well, the answer is because we are like that. We see in Jesus what we want to see, and what we want to see is something like us.

It may surprise you to know that there was a tradition in the early middle ages to portray Jesus as small, ugly, weak, and swarthy. Why would they do this? Well, part of it is because of the story of Zacchaeus. Look at the pronouns in 19:3. We assume all the he's refer to Zacchaeus, but the Greek isn't clear on that. It could be that Jesus is the one who is short in stature and the reason Zacchaeus can't see Jesus is because he couldn't see *down to Jesus over the crowd*. So he climbs a tree to get a new perspective, to see down to where Jesus is hidden by the crowd, because Jesus is so short.

Here is another thought about just the words themselves. The word 'short' in Greek can also mean 'diminished'. "He was diminished in stature" this could read. In that reading, Zacchaeus cannot see Jesus because the crowd will not allow him to get to the front of the crowd to see Jesus. The phrase could be emphasizing how much the crowd hates tax collectors, because they did.

Things change quickly when we just understand how we are using words.

Even with all this, Jesus sees Zacchaeus in the tree and calls him down and invites himself over for dinner. Jesus says, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I am staying at your house today." And then hear how Zacchaeus responds. "He hurried and came down and received him joyfully". A couple weeks ago, we talked about how seriously we take everything in our faith lives. It is easy to forget that joy is one of the ways all of creation responds to the presence of God. Isaiah says,

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad;  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom like the crocus;  
2 it shall blossom abundantly  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it,  
the majesty of Carmel and Sharon.  
They shall see the glory of the LORD,  
the majesty of our God.

But we got onto talking about Zacchaeus by talking about how to minister to the very wealthy. Before we get to an answer to that question, I want to share with you one of the fears that arose within me when I started trying to follow Jesus. When Kate and I started going to church again, I decided to read through the entire Bible again. This series of stories today went deep into my soul. The reason was because I realized how easy it is to let Jesus pass by. My fear is that Jesus will pass me by. I don't live with that fear all the time, but it comes up occasionally. It is a fear I share with the blind man and our very wealthy tax collector. Will I know Jesus when he comes by? And if I do know, will I care enough to call out to him or make myself visible so Jesus does not pass by? And then how would I answer the question he asks of the blind man – "What do you want me to do for you?" Sometimes, I don't know the answer to that question, and it seems to me I should, because it is a very good question to have an answer to.

The fear I have is the same fear shared by the begging blind man and the super-rich, yacht-sailing, universally scorned tax collector. That tells us something about how we minister to the wealthy. The concerns we have are most likely the concerns they have. Like us, they have broken families and relationships that need healing. Like us, the temptations are many which lead us to harm family and friend and stranger alike, temptations that lead us away from God.

The crowd is frustrated when Jesus chooses Zacchaeus. The crowd thought they knew Jesus and what he would do, but things are not as they appear when Jesus shows up. The way we tell the story does not always communicate what is actually going on. What we want does not always happen the way we want it to.

Which brings us to one more translation issue. In front of Jesus and the crowd, Zacchaeus speaks. Look at the translation you have on page \_\_\_\_\_. It is written in the future tense, right? “I WILL give half of my possessions to the poor, and anyone who has been defrauded I WILL pay back four-fold”. But the Greek is best translated into the present tense. So in front of the crowd and Jesus, Zacchaeus may actually be saying, “Look, I GIVE half my possessions to the poor, and whenever someone is defrauded I PAY BACK four times what they lost.”

We want to read this as a conversion story about horrible, short, Zacchaeus and how great it is that Jesus can change someone like him. But it may be that Zacchaeus is the one who shows mercy in the midst of a broken, corrupt system of exchange. And so in front of Jesus and the crowd, Zacchaeus testifies to the mercy he shows now, and has likely shown in the past.

Jesus responds by saying, and I am paraphrasing here, “This is what salvation looks like and today I am going to a house that shows salvation and mercy. Zacchaeus, whom you all condemn for doing dirty work and for his wealth, is no different from you – he is also a son of Abraham. The Son of Man came to show mercy, and Zacchaeus shows what it is like to show mercy.”

The blessing of the Gospel of Christ is that it knows no partiality. The words and actions of Jesus and God in the world bloom wherever fertile soil is present, and that is not dependent on status, condition, money, or any other quality we may impose on other people. The point of connection, though, is made clear in our Gospel today. Things are not as they appear with people. We cannot really know what another person is like and what they need until we start talking with them. One way that breaks down all the barriers, though, is mercy and compassion. Like the blind man, the mercy and compassion received is the mercy we can now give. Like Zacchaeus, the mercy and compassion given is the mercy we are now capable of receiving. We can only really be open to mercy and compassion when we know Jesus could pass us by, and we determine that we will not let that happen. And knowing that, we now know we could just pass someone in need of mercy by, and we determine we will not let that happen. Because mercy and compassion is the entrance for how we can talk with others about God and Christ. Where is compassion needed, and where is compassion shown.

Did you know that Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft, is worth \$75 billion? He is on track to be the world’s first trillionaire by 2040. But Bill Gates also gives away 90% of his income every year. If I were to talk to Bill Gates about faith, I wouldn’t ask him what he believes and nor would I talk about how much money he has. I would ask Bill Gates what he does to show compassion around the world. And then I would find out that the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has almost eradicated malaria around the world, has provided education and materials for that education to some of the poorest places in the world, has provided internet to remote and impoverished areas. The reason for the internet in those areas is not so people can surf and watch Netflix. It is so they have access to online banking which provides micro-loans to start businesses which have been responsible for raising thousands out of poverty in those areas. Compassion is the access point for how we talk about faith, how we communicate with others about Jesus Christ.

Now, my question about ministering to the wealthy may be my own concern, and may have to do with personal issues I have around money. That is very likely true. But the simple fact of the matter is that the presence of Christ does not differentiate between rich and poor, between begging blind men and rich tax collectors. The perspectives we have on the wealthy and the poor, from a Christ-following perspective, only clarify once we care about whether Jesus will pass us by or not. Do we want to see Jesus? What is the perspective, the worldview, the attitude that keeps you from seeing

him? Maybe it is something you have very little control over – in the same way the blind man has little control over his blindness, or in the same way Zacchaeus cannot control the attitude of the crowds. But what all of us can do is call out to Jesus and tell him what we want.

“What do you want me to do for you?”, Jesus asks the blind man.

The answer to that, the people who show up, and the ways in which God provides may not appear in the way you expect.

Praise be to God for the hidden and mysterious ways compassion is given and received.

Amen.