

Going Where the People Are  
Luke 19:1-10  
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)  
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Yes, indeed, so many of us hear this passage and then hear the strains of that childhood tune singing in our heads. But, as Vickie reminded us, this story is so much more significant than what our favorite line about the “wee little man” lets on.

And there is so much we miss if we aren’t paying attention.

For one thing, the social conventions of the time are broken again and again in this story.

Zacchaeus does things unbecoming, and frankly unacceptable, of a man of his wealth and position. Running and climbing trees...that is child’s play and would have been embarrassing for him.

Jesus, too, breaks the social conventions as he not only affirms one who is considered the enemy of the people - after all tax collectors, even if they weren’t cheating, were working with the hated Roman empire - but Jesus also chooses, as he often encourages others, to enter the home of someone who was not seen as acceptable.

And I want us to pause there for a minute. Because even though we hear Jesus say, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5, NRSV)...even though we sing that song saying, “Zacchaeus, you come down, for I’m going to your house today”...still I’m not sure that we often pause in the reality of what it means for Jesus to go to his house.

And perhaps we get further and further from this the less time we spend in strangers’ homes or the less time we spend getting to know people by entering their home, not as a friend, but first as an acquaintance.

Friends, being in someone’s home is powerful. It is an act of intimacy that perhaps we don’t always fully appreciate.

As a pastor, one of the privileges that I have often had is to go to people’s homes. Just this last week, I had the opportunity to visit someone new to First Christian in their home. And one of the conversations we had was about how there is a different level of coming to know each other when we are situated in each other’s space. It doesn’t even have to be a home that is much different than what one is used to. But just being together in a home gives us insight, lets us see people in what we might call their native environment, often lets us see them more relaxed, gives us prompts for conversation brought about by pictures on the walls or treasures on the shelves.

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These visits, though they don't happen as often as I wish, are gifts for me as a pastor. And that isn't just the lovely, pleasant, comfortable ones, but all of them.

As a pastor I have visited people in homes where I felt uneasy as well as homes where I immediately felt comfortable.

I have sat in living rooms that were so meticulous I feared I might hurt something and I have sat in others where cockroaches kept us company.

I have eaten at the tables of people who seemed to cook things that could grace the cover of a magazine and have eaten food I felt nervous about, but knew that honoring the host was more important than my hesitations.

I have been welcomed as a first guest in a new home and as one of the final guests of people who were dying at home.

There is something special about being in the home of another. And I don't think that was lost on Jesus.

In fact, I'm pretty sure that going into homes - whether those of friends like Mary, Martha, and Lazarus...whether those of Pharisees who were challenging him...whether those of people who needed healing...whether those of Zacchaeus and others called sinners - I'm pretty sure that entering the home of another was always an intentional act for Jesus.

And this story reminds us of the gift that occurs when Jesus visits Zacchaeus. In this act, Zacchaeus' humanity is honored. He is no longer reduced to his vilified profession, but instead is seen as a human being worthy of love. And that matters.

Not only that, but in this visit we see a change in Zacchaeus. Did you hear what Vickie read to us? In Luke 19:8 we heard, "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'" (NRSV).

But, there's something here that scholars tell us we miss in translation. As Meda Stamper reminds us, "The use of the Greek present tense in Zacchaeus' statements means that this commitment is ongoing, not something he will do only once, and it may mean that he has already been doing these things" ([Commentary on Luke 19:1-10 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)).

Friends, we don't want to miss that possibility. See, usually we just assume that when Jesus honors Zacchaeus with a visit, it changes Zacchaeus and he goes from being a villain to becoming a hero. But, this insight opens up the possibility that Zacchaeus was already changing, was already committed to redemption and to justice. It is possible, when we look at the original language, that it was this change in Zacchaeus that inspired his wanting to see Jesus, and that Jesus' visit didn't so much prompt the

change, but allowed others to see it. Perhaps Zacchaeus was already righting any wrongs he had committed but it took Jesus visiting him for anyone to learn this.

Now, either way Jesus affirms Zacchaeus and reminds those around that the reach of God is wider than the boundaries of their social conventions. And *that* matters either way.

But, still it's important to entertain the possibility that we see people more clearly close up...that often the assumptions we make based on the few details we have not only don't show the whole picture, but are sometimes totally incorrect. It is important to entertain the possibility that when we come to know someone, to see them for who they really are, that everything about them makes more sense and isn't nearly as bad as first believed.

So, friends, what if this is not only a story to inspire us to admire Jesus, but also a story to invite us to reach out of our comfort zone, to cross the boundaries of our culture, to leave the safety of what we know or think we know, and to enter into the spaces and places of people who are not like us, people who we think we know something about, people who we are comfortable making assumptions of.

We're not talking about forcing our way, unwanted, into other people's homes and lives. But we are reminded that it is important to go where people live...to make ourselves available...to be willing even to take risks because other people matter that much.

See, it's easier to invite people into our space and to ask them to be or become just like us. It's easier to stay in the places where we feel safe and know what to expect. It's easier to just circle the wagons of welcome only letting people like us in.

But Jesus addresses this time and time again. He not only tells us to let others in, but he tells us to go to where others are...to leave what is comfortable to us and to come to know the realities of people not like us.

These last several weeks we have been hearing scriptures that our campers and counselors spent time with at church camp this summer - these passages connected by the theme "Build More Chairs." But today we are reminded that sometimes building more chairs or celebrating that there is room at the table for everyone isn't only about us inviting others into our space, but is also about us risking ourselves and stepping out of our comfort zones to carry welcome and love to people in the midst of their messy, beautiful lives in places we might not otherwise go.

This is our invitation...to go out into the places where people live, to get to know them for who they really are, and to see the humanity in all of God's children. May it be so.