AWAKEN TO GRACE, RESPOND IN GRATITUDE

Luke 19:1-10

October 30, 2022

Guilford Park Presbyterian Church

I want to open today with a little song. You may recognize the tune:

“Five foot two, was a Jew, and a tax collector too,

Zacchaeus was a tiny man.

Jesus was, passing by, all the others stood too high,

Zacchaeus was a tiny man.

So he climbed a tree, thinking he, might see the Lord.

The Lord looked up, looked around, said, ‘Zacchaeus come on down.

At your house, I must stay. That is why I’m here today,’

Oh, Jesus was a hungry man.

So he came down, hit the ground, overjoyed that he was found,

Zacchaeus was a grateful man.

Crowd saw them, head for dinner; disapproved ‘cuz Zac’s a sinner,

But Jesus was a hungry man.

Well, Zacchaeus said, ‘I’ll return, all I have stole.

If I have cheated anyone, I will pay him back four-fold.’

Jesus said, ‘Today’s the time. Life is yours and you are mine,’

Zacchaeus isn’t tiny, [his life is bright and shiny,]

Zacchaeus is a new-born ma-an!”

Well, you may be quite familiar with another song about Zacchaeus, a children’s song that has been around for a long time. You may not be quite so familiar with the one I just sang. I thought it would be good to sing to the tune of “Five-foot-two, Eyes of Blue,” since Zacchaeus is apparently a short guy who needs to climb a tree in order to see Jesus.

In any case, today we encounter the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus in our lectionary reading from the gospel of Luke. And hopefully we can learn something helpful from the story – and perhaps be inspired to “awaken to grace,” as Zacchaeus does – and be inspired to “respond in gratitude,” as Zacchaeus does. Awakening to grace and responding in gratitude describes one focus of today’s worship service – stewardship and our commitment to sharing our resources with this particular church.

Another focus of today’s worship service is the Protestant Reformation – for today is Reformation Sunday. And our text for today from the prophet Habakkuk is behind the whole thing. This text probably arises around 608-598 BC, when the Babylonians are in power over the ancient Hebrews. Habakkuk is particularly interested in why a just God is “silent when the wicked swallow those more righteous than they.” Habakkuk’s answer is that God is sovereign and will deal with the wicked. As for the “righteous” Habakkuk writes in our text that “the righteous live by their faith.” And this statement turns out to underlie a fundamental doctrine of the Protestant Reformation – justification by faith alone.

So – stewardship and Reformation – those are the two emphases in my little sermon for today. And the emphases are connected. For the “righteous live by their faith” – per Habakkuk – by awakening to grace and responding in gratitude – per Zacchaeus.

So, first of all, how did we get from Habakkuk to the Reformation? Well, it goes through the apostle Paul. If you look at the first chapter of Paul’s letter to the Romans, you will read this in verse 17: “For in the gospel the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, ‘The one who is righteous will live by faith.’” Paul is quoting our Habakkuk text in verse 17 of Romans. And Paul uses that text from Habakkuk as the basis for developing his fundamental Christian doctrine of “justification by faith alone” – which is to say: salvation by faith alone, by grace alone – salvation, in other words, completely through the act and will of God, not through anything that any human being does or says.

And from Paul we jump to Martin Luther – for this quote by Paul from Habakkuk turns out to be a prime motivator for Martin Luther in helping to bring about the 16th century Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther, himself, writes of suddenly discovering the meaning of this Habakkuk verse that Paul quotes in Romans – Luther “awakens to grace,” as it were – Luther awakens to the reality that there is nothing he can do or say in order to earn the grace of God. The grace and love of God is a gift. Not only that, but so is his faith a gift of God. That is, his faith comes from the Spirit of God that dwells in him (another teaching of Paul, by the way) – the Spirit of God in him prodding him to awaken. So, Luther “responds in gratitude,” helping to bring about the 16th century Protestant Reformation.

Now, as for Zacchaeus, it is the mere presence of Jesus – and the call of Jesus – that does the trick. But first, Zacchaeus has to climb a tree! After all, he’s only “five-foot-two,” as it were.

It’s important to note, I think, that Zacchaeus is a tax collector – a chief tax collector, even, and he is rich. We encounter tax collectors all over the place in the gospel stories, and, apparently, they can be quite despicable – preying upon the people and extorting money for unjust, illegal taxes and lining their own pockets with embezzled money.

Yet, as we read over and over, Jesus welcomes such tax collectors, Jesus dines with tax collectors, Jesus loves and forgives tax collectors. Zacchaeus apparently doesn’t know all this yet as he climbs up the tree and tries to see Jesus. But he soon finds out.

For Jesus calls out to Zacchaeus and invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus’ house. This call of Jesus is a divine call. For it is the stirring of the real presence of God, the Spirit of God dwelling in the heart of Zacchaeus, that leads Zacchaeus to respond to the call of Jesus. And Zacchaeus awakens to grace – grace as the presence of Jesus, grace as the call of Jesus.

Zacchaeus now sees who Jesus is – and he hurries down from the tree and welcomes Jesus. The crowd grumbles about Zacchaeus being a “sinner,” but then, that’s the point. God’s grace is for sinners. God’s grace is God’s to give – not ours to judge. And God gives it to everyone – if they only wake up and see – as Zacchaeus does.

And Zacchaeus then responds – he responds in gratitude – he responds in this story by sharing his vast financial resources – giving half of his possessions to the poor, paying back fourfold those he has cheated in the past. It’s quite a response, indeed. Such a response is one of the ways in which “the righteous live by faith” – and Zacchaeus is surely among the “righteous” – that is, those who have been made “right” with God – wholly through the gift of grace that comes from God – through the gift of faith, that comes from God dwelling within.

Well, this response of Zacchaeus is a pretty good model for us in our current stewardship campaign. For example, there are many reasons for sharing money with our church, but one of the most important is that we have seen Jesus – as Zacchaeus does – in this church. When we wake up, we realize that we have seen Jesus in the mission and ministry of this church, and we realize that Jesus calls us to respond in gratitude – partially by sharing our financial resources with this church. Such sharing is one of the ways in which “the righteous live by their faith” – to use the words of Habakkuk.

Such sharing is the result of what one person has put it as “recognition energy.” That is, our inspiration to share what we have with this church is an energy that erupts once we “recognize” the real presence of the living Christ in this place and in our hearts. Our financial stewardship commitments are the result of “recognition energy.”

So, in sum, Habakkuk is the inspiration for Paul, who is the inspiration for Martin Luther, who is the inspiration for the Protestant church, which is the inspiration for our faith at Guilford Park Presbyterian Church. It’s all about inspiration – inspiration is the Spirit of God that dwells in the hearts of human beings like us, leading human beings like us to awaken to grace, freely and unconditionally given by God, and to respond in gratitude – as Zacchaeus does.

As you offer your stewardship commitments today, I encourage you to keep in mind the Reformation that has brought us all here today – as well as the story of Zacchaeus that teaches us to awaken to grace – and respond in gratitude – in all we do and say in this world and in this church – Guilford Park Presbyterian Church.

Let us pray: God of Grace, God of Faith, awaken us once again to your everlasting presence and unconditional love, and inspire us to respond in gratitude through the giving of our resources and our very selves to this church, the church of Jesus Christ. In his love, we pray. Amen.