

August 14, 2016

"Welcome to the Club"

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. **2** There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. **3** He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. **4** So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way.

5 When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name.

"Zacchaeus!" he said. "Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today."

6 Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. **7** But the people were displeased. "He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner," they grumbled.

8 Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"

9 Jesus responded, "Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost."

"I refuse to join any club that would have me for a member."

- Graucho Marx

Whether you call it a club, a group, a fraternity, a sorority, or a gang they all have one thing in common.

When I was in high school, and maybe it is the same today, we put people in different groups. There were those who were good at sports, we called them the jocks. Those who were smart we called the brains. Those who were bad we called the hoods and those who were into drugs we call the heads.

In school there were the popular kids, the insiders and others... they were the misfits – the outsiders. The outsiders form their own groups so at least there was one place where they could feel in rather than out. In their groups they were the insiders and everyone else were the outsiders. Of course there were the loners, they didn't seem to belong anywhere. But even they seemed to find at least one other loner to hang with.

All these groups and all groups clubs, fraternities, sororities, or gangs all have this one thing in common... they excluded others. You can't be in my group because you're not athletic enough, or smart enough, or bad enough, or good enough, or rich enough, or poor enough, or don't agree with me enough. You see, we find our identity or worth by excluding all but the chosen.

But the place where this is most upsetting and where a terrible price is paid for exclusion is in the cause of religion; and religion has a long history of doing that very

thing. What Luke sets out to show us is that with God there are no outsiders. No one is excluded unless they chose to be. Jesus came for all and all are accepted in Christ.

Luke himself was an outsider, he is the only gentile - non-Jew - of all the New Testament writers. And so it's Luke who shows how Jesus includes everyone, even those typically treated as outsiders by the religious establishment of his day: women, common laborers (like the sheepherders), the racially different (like the Samaritans), the poor. To Jesus religion was not an exclusive club.

This is great news because all of us have found ourselves feeling left out at times - misfits. Most of us, most of the time find ourselves on the outside looking in on life with no hope of gaining entrance. But in Christ the doors have been flung wide open. We are welcomed by God in Jesus.

When we understand what God thinks of us, it changes the way we see ourselves, and that starts changing our hearts to be Christ-like, and that helps us to love others.

There is a very good example of that in the Gospel of Luke. It involves a man named Zacchaeus, and we are going to talk about him this morning.

Zacchaeus was an outsider. He was a chief tax collector in a very good location which made him a very rich man. He collected taxes in Jericho which was an important trade route. Many people would pass through Jericho on the road to Jerusalem and so it was a prosperous trade city.

Though a Jew, Zacchaeus worked for Rome, to collect taxes, but he could choose the percentage he would collect. For example if Rome wanted 5% he could collect 10% and keep the extra for himself. This made him rich man especially because he collected in this very busy area where many people passed. But it also made him excluded - an outsider. Tax collectors were disowned by their family, hated by the religious people and not allowed to worship in the synagogue, and were considered as bad as a murderer.

One day Jesus also was passing through this prosperous city of Jericho on His way to Jerusalem where He would be arrested, tortured, and put to death for the sins of THE WORLD – the whole world, including the Zaccheaus' of the world – the outsiders.

Though a rich man Zacchaeus knew he was missing something in his life, with all his wealth he did not feel fulfilled. Perhaps he had a guilty conscience because he was ripping off people, maybe not. Perhaps he was miserable because of how he was hated and treated. He wanted to see Jesus and he had a deeper motive than just curiosity. It is likely that some of his desire to see Jesus came from having heard of Jesus and His kind remarks concerning tax collectors.

The religious hated tax collectors, they even called Zacchaeus a "notorious sinner." Not just a sinner but a disgraceful, dishonest, seedy, infamous sinner.

Zacchaeus being a short man couldn't see Jesus over the heads of the crowd so he climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road. This type of tree had low horizontal limbs which made climbing them easy, and usually had sufficient leaves which would have helped Zacchaeus hide from the crowd that hated him. But, v5...

When Jesus came by, he looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name.
"Zacchaeus!" he said. "Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today."

This implies that there was in the heart of Jesus an inner compulsion to go home with Zacchaeus. Jesus always responds sympathetically to those who seek to know Him.

Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. (v6)

Now Jericho was one of the cities of the priests, but Jesus passed all the homes of the priests and chose the house of the chief tax collector instead. What? He was the outcast, the outsider, the misfit, that is, to the religious priests. Jesus is always doing stuff like this, you expect Him to go to the home of one of the main priests in the area; But to Jesus it was Zaccheaus who was the most worthy of His presence and to be His host, but who else would have expected Jesus to choose Zacchaeus? No one else in the crowd did, (v7)

But the people were displeased. "He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner," they grumbled.

Not just the priests, but all the people were displeased - it was a unanimous disapproval. While Zacchaeus finally felt excepted, excited and full of joy, the people failed to see the heart of Jesus.

Two things kept them from recognizing the heart of Jesus: they were blinded by exclusiveness, refusing to see any good in a tax collector. And the other was their inability to understand how Jesus could associate with such a sinner. (v8)

Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, "I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!"

Jesus' acceptance of Zacchaeus results in a changed heart. Zacchaeus now had a truly generous spirit and a genuine desire to make right any past wrong. Zacchaeus was not talking to the crowd to convince them that he was sincere, he was addressing Jesus. It was a spontaneous response of a heart made clean and a spirit given new and eternal life. It must be our response too. Instead of excluding people, and cheating people, love becomes the top priority. Love becomes your greatest aim.

9 Jesus responded, "Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. **10** For the Son of Man came to seek and save

those who are lost."

A seeking sinner met the seeking Savior. Jesus says this man is a true son of Abraham. Not an outsider, not a misfit, but by faith he now had a new and living way.

In v10 Jesus states His major purpose for coming to this world, to seek and save. Jesus Christ is Savior of the entire world, no one is excluded and so no one must be excluded by us either. All are lost, all need to be saved, Jesus came for the entire world. He came to seek and save those who are lost. As His followers we must accept all people and we too must seek them with the message of life in and through Jesus Christ. Everyone's welcome. And we mean everyone. Every color, every race, every religion and none, every sexual preference every nationality, every disability - everyone, including any category of humanity I've left out. Everyone's welcome. Jesus excludes no one and so neither must we.

One day, a brief encounter with Jesus, and it changed a life. Why? Because Zacchaeus learned how much he mattered to God.

If you are feeling a little down or a little empty, or a little like an outsider today, you came to the right place because this is a place of hope. This is a place of Jesus Christ. This is the place God wants you to be right now; His house.

How do we know we can have hope even when things are going wrong? Even when we feel we don't matter to others? We have hope because we know that we matter to God.

The story about Zacchaeus illustrates three truths. If you will remember these you'll never again have problems with how you feel about your self worth or the worth of anyone else:

(TRUTH # 1) - JESUS NOTICES YOU!

No matter how badly I feel when nobody else seems to notice me; I know that Jesus Christ notices me.

Zacchaeus wanted to get a glimpse but he was so short he couldn't see above the crowd. So Zacchaeus did two things that no wealthy Middle Eastern man would do. He ran through a crowd, and he climbed a tree. These were things that little boys might do in crowds but not well-known men.

That was shocking but what Jesus did was even more shocking. Jesus walks straight through the city, past thousands of people and walks right up to that tree where Zacchaeus was and stops. Notice what happens.

When Jesus came by, He looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. "Zacchaeus!" he said. "Quick, come down! For I must be a guest in your home today."

Why do you think Jesus did that? I think it was because Jesus knew Zacchaeus' heart, just like He knows your heart today.

You might be up a tree today, or maybe even out on a limb. And you may feel alone and think even God has forgotten you, but in reality, there's never been a time when God took His eyes off you. He's heard every breath you've ever taken, He's felt every thought you ever had, and He's seen everything you've ever done. God has always had His loving eyes upon your life – because God really does care about you.

The deepest expression of love is attention. When you give somebody your attention you're giving them your love. When you don't pay attention to your husband or wife or kids you are actually being unloving. God is always paying attention to us. It may not seem like it to us because we really are not all that focused on Him, but again, He is always focused on us.

(TRUTH # 2) - JESUS LIFTS YOU UP.

All of his life Zacchaeus had been ridiculed and rejected. He was short in stature, always was, at least that how it usually is – not that I should know. And it would be safe to assume that he was the target of ridicule all of his life. And, this may have something to do with the fact that he was corrupt and didn't care if he collected from the Jews and gave it to the Romans.

Jesus looked up at Zacchaeus in front of this huge crowd and called him by name, which shocked everybody because Jesus knew the name of the biggest scoundrel in town. But, in spite of Zacchaeus' sin, Jesus lifts him up while everybody else is putting him down.

You may have been hurt, rejected by other groups, this is why you have felt insignificant and insecure. The only way you can get over these things in your life is by realizing that you are so special to Jesus, that He makes you a joint heir to the kingdom of God with Him.

Where we say, "I can't see my value because of all that has happened to me.", God says, "I can see all your value in spite of all that's happened to you."

When this world trips you up, it is only Jesus who lifts you up.

(TRUTH # 3) - JESUS WANTS YOU.

I think the hardest thing for us to understand is that no matter what we have ever done in our lives, no matter if we are misfits to others, God still wants to have a personal relationship with us because he loves us.

People made Zacchaeus feel their hatred because he was a cheat and they hated him.

So Jesus Christ did something. He didn't just walk up to the tree and look up and notice him. And He didn't just call him by name and affirm him in front of those who hated him. He invited Himself to Zacchaeus' home for dinner.

The truth is we are a lot like Zacchaeus was. We have all done things that have hurt others. But Jesus is far more interested in changing us than He is in condemning us. So He looks at you and He says, "I know you, I love you and I want you in spite of all that you've done. And I want you to love Me and have a relationship with Me."

There is a story that says God and the devil were talking and God told the devil that He was going to take some things away from him.

God said He was going to take sickness, poverty and many other things away from the devil, and the devil said no problem. Then, finally, God said He was going to take discouragement away from the devil, and the devil came unglued! The devil told God that was the best weapon he had. He said when everything else fails, all he had to do was throw a little discouragement in front of somebody and they would always fall for it and lose focus of the truth.

The devil uses the discouragement in our lives to keep us from having a healthy and loving relationship with Jesus, too. And, the sad part is we always seem to fall for it.

No matter what has ever happened in your life, no matter how badly you have ever been hurt, or how badly you have hurt others, Jesus wants to love you and have you love Him.

If I held up a fifty-dollar bill, and asked who wanted it, how many of you would say, "I do?" Now, If I crumbled it up, stepped on it, got it all dirty and wrinkled, how many would want the \$50.00? Raise your hands.

See, no matter what it has gone through, it has not lost its original value. That is a rather loose comparison, but you see what I mean, don't you? No matter what you have gone through before today, God still loves and wants you, because He knows you have not lost your original value to Him.

With a God that offers us so much love and eternal happiness, I think we should react in the same way as Zacchaeus did - with great excitement and joy! I cannot comprehend why anyone would refuse God when He is standing there with His arms open.

Jesus knows you have been terribly hurt in the past. He knows that hurt is still with you even today. And He wants you to know that He loves you enough to take that hurt away. He loves you enough to set you free from it. Will you let Him do that for you this morning - let Him take the hurts away? Do you trust him enough to open your heart to Him this morning? It does not matter whether you have ever responded to His invitation before. Jesus wants so desperately for you to respond to His invitation to you today. Will you do that for Him?