

Jesus Didn't Have an Office

Ordination for Carol Lewis
Richard C. Allen
January 12, 2014

Luke 19:1-10
South Glastonbury
Connecticut

Throughout the Bible, we find models for ministry. Among those that have meant the most to me is the model we find in the well-known story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector. I'd like to poke around in this story for the next ten or fifteen minutes, exploring how Jesus goes about doing his ministry.

The first thing we see is that Jesus doesn't have an office! Or, if he does have an office, he doesn't hang out there waiting for folks to drop in. There are stories, of course, where people like Nicodemus seek out Jesus where he is staying, but in the Zacchaeus story, Jesus is "out there" where life is real and raw, where people are suffering and hurting, where the rubber meets the road.

Meeting people where they are: this is a fundamental understanding of Christian ministry. The minister I had in Confirmation in 1961 handed us his business card with his home phone number on it, and he told us we could call him anytime of the day or night, at 2:00 a.m. if need be; and he meant it. He would come to be our pastor no matter what the circumstance, no questions asked.

So, the first thing we see in the Zacchaeus story is that Jesus is out of the office, out there where people are literally "out on a limb." The story teller really knew what he was doing when he positioned the tax collector out on a limb. It's the perfect metaphor.

In my first parish, an Indian Reservation in western South Dakota, I was driving north one day on highway 65 toward Eagle Butte. As I approached the ranch home of the Larsen Family, not in my parish but in the neighborhood, I remembered that Mrs. Larsen had been killed in a car wreck a few months back. I had attended the funeral because that's what you do out there. I found myself wondering how her husband might be doing. I pulled off the tar road and drove into his driveway. Knocked on his door. The coffee pot was on the stove, so we sat and talked, maybe a half hour. I saw him occasionally up town. Years later, when it was time for us to move to Wisconsin, he stopped by the parsonage to tell me that that 30 minute cup of coffee had saved his life. He didn't go into the details. It was just one of those things that happens when you get out of the office, out to those places where hearts ache and where grief is raw.

The next thing we see in the Zacchaeus story is the way Jesus notices the man up in the sycamore tree. There is a whole crowd out along the road. I picture it as a parade. Maybe hundreds of on-lookers, autograph seekers, curiosity lovers. Out of all who are there, Jesus notices the one whose life is fractured. He notices something about the man's face, his body language, his position in the tree. The point is: he notices Zacchaeus. His eye is trained to spot the one who is desperate, the one in need of a little pastoral care, the one who needs to be loved into wholeness.

That scene along the parade route, under the sycamore tree, reminds me of the Sunday church coffee hour, the receiving line at the front door at the close of the service, or the hallway of the church in-between events. The pastor may have preached a dynamite sermon and offered a stirring prayer, but the ministry also happens in the coffee hour and in these other locations. Zacchaeus is there in the coffee gathering. He'll be at the reception at the close of this service!

He's the one up in the tree, the one whose body language cries out for a little acceptance, cries out for somebody to notice, for somebody to care. I call this the coffee hour ministry.

It's where the Zacchaeus of your church lets you know that his wife is waiting for test results, that his grandson has been arrested for underage drinking, where a youth lets you know she might be pregnant.

So, in this model of ministry, the pastor is the one who has a trained eye for spotting the one whose life is about to fall apart, the one whose body language suggests that something is terribly wrong. It's not that Jesus had X-Ray vision; it's that he had an eye for noticing a broken heart, a troubled soul, a guilty conscience. And wherever he might have been going, whatever the agenda for the day might have been; he stopped right there. Said, "Zacchaeus, come down. Let's talk about your life, what you need to find salvation." I can picture the disciples trying to get his attention, painfully aware of the day's schedule of events. But in that moment, nothing else matters. He spies one troubled soul, and that halts him in his tracks. This is a wonderful model for ministry. It often leads to exhaustion, but it also leads to fulfillment of the deepest kind. One could do worse than be known as the minister who noticed me up in the sycamore tree.

Thirdly, Jesus and Zacchaeus end up at the tax collector's house. We see that Jesus doesn't offer him a lecture on morality or a sermon on the 10 Commandments, not even a chiding for maybe having ripped off his neighbors. What he does offer is a presence of caring. He seems to get it that Zacchaeus knows precisely what is the problem, what is the diagnosis, and what he needs to do about it. Zacchaeus knows he needs to make things right with his tax customers. He knows he's defrauded plenty of people. He knows about his responsibility for restitution.

He longs to be a person of integrity, a person who can be trusted. Jesus doesn't have to confront him with any of his foolishness. Jesus just gives him a presence of love, an environment of grace, an air of hope, a posture of possibility.

It's this ministry of presence that allows people to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling. It's this ministry of presence that allows a woman to say what she needs to say, that allows a man to confess what he needs to confess, that allows a human being to be fully human.

In the Zacchaeus story, we see that the one who needs the help finds the help within himself. Jesus seems to have confidence that Zacchaeus already knows what he needs. As a seed at planting time needs a warm, welcoming, fertile soil, so does a man or a woman on the day of reconciliation need a warm, welcoming pastor.

Finally, at the close of the story, we see Jesus making an awesome pronouncement, "Today, salvation has come to this house." I can picture Zacchaeus, actually hear him, breathing a sigh of relief. Though the tax collector has done the reflecting and has made the commitment and is ready to turn his life around, it matters to him that Jesus makes this sacred declaration. "Today, salvation has come to this house." It hints at the significance of this additional aspect of ministry, the ministry of pronouncement. It has to do with the authority of the pastoral office. We hear Jesus pronouncing: "Your faith has made you well." "Go and do likewise." "Peace be with you." "Let not your hearts be troubled." "Come, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world."

The ministry of pronouncement can sound like this: Having given yourselves to each other with solemn vows, I pronounce you are now married. Having confirmed your response to the call of God, I now pronounce you are an ordained minister. Having received the waters of Baptism, I pronounce you are now a Christian. Having uttered your statement of faith, I now pronounce you Confirmed.

When the authority of the pastoral office is used to make such proclamations, there is a blessed clarity, there is a new beginning, there is a sacred context established.

Carol, come spring, I aim to plant a sycamore tree in your front yard. It will grow and thrive there. It will be a lasting symbol of a model for ministry embedded in Scripture. You'll come bounding out of the front door and be reminded everyday to spend some time outside of your office, to be a keen observer of the ones out on a limb, to offer a presence of loving acceptance, and, when appropriate, to make the blessed pronouncement, "Today, salvation has come to this house."

As always, I remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.