

Streetsville United Church
Sunday, November 4, 2007
Rev. John Tapscott

“STANDING TALL”

Luke 19:8

The ancient city of Jericho, where the walls came tumbling down some 4,000 years ago, was in the news recently. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert visited the lovely west bank city to talk peace with Palestian President, Mahmoud Abbas. But some people were not pleased with Olmet’s presence in Jericho. Last week it was revealed there had been a terrorist plot to take his life. Thankfully the plot was foiled by Israeli security.

Nearly 2,000 years ago Jesus entered Jericho and passed through on his way to Jerusalem. And there in the “City of Palms” Jesus brought peace and a new direction to an unlikely candidate. Walls came tumbling down within a person’s heart and a short man stood tall again. Luke 19:8 reads “And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything I restore it fourfold.” Jesus’ presence enabled Zacchaeus to stand tall. Is it not true for us, too - that Jesus’ presence enables us to stand tall?

Zacchaeus was Jericho’s chief tax collector. He was curious about Jesus’ arrival, but couldn’t see over the crowds, because he was small of stature. So he climbed a sycamore tree and sat or laid on one of its leafy branches to watch Jesus pass by.

But the point about Zacchaeus is not that he was tall or short physically. Zacchaeus was a Jew, a Son of Abraham. His very name meant righteous or clean, but he was neither. Zacchaeus had won the franchise from the Romans to collect taxes in Jericho, and tax collectors were well-known for using strong-arm tactics. The thug whom Zacchaeus sent to your door was much scarier than any tax collector from Revenue Canada. And once the taxes had been collected, the chief collector would keep a significant commission before passing on the rest to the Roman occupiers. That’s how Zacchaeus became rich. Of course, all this meant he was very much disliked. Zacchaeus probably lived in a house behind an iron gate. In fact, he was taking a considerable personal risk coming out into the streets to see Jesus. No, Zacchaeus’ problem wasn’t his height. It was his smallness inside. Zacchaeus was diminished in soul, shrivelled in spirit.

But truthfully all of us are diminished in soul, in some way. It may come from being rejected and put-down by others. Long-term unemployment, for example, can shrivel a

person's spirit and blunt their ambition. These days I see many shops and establishments with signs saying "Help Wanted." These signs were never seen back in the 70's when I entered the workforce. Getting a first job was more difficult then. And it was far worse in the Depression when the signs read "No Help Wanted." That hopeless situation can diminish a person's soul and make them feel small. So too can grinding poverty. As can war and terrorism for both perpetrators and victims.

Yes, our souls become diminished by what others do to us and by what happens to us. People were diminished by what Zacchaeus was doing to them. Zacchaeus himself was diminished by the negative feelings others had towards him. And Zacchaeus was diminishing himself by his own actions. You see, it's quite a circle. We're sometimes diminished by others, but own words and actions sometimes diminish others, making them feel small and insignificant. And we can do it to ourselves. We can allow certain things into our lives that diminish our souls.

You see, here's the real reason we sometimes diminish others and ourselves, or are put down by others. It's because by nature our human souls are diminished. The apostle Paul tells us that there is a power within us that causes us to do the things we know we shouldn't do, and not do the things we know we should do. This power is called sin. The reason we keep visiting a questionable website; or cut corners on our taxes; the reason we gossip maliciously about a neighbour; the reason we are sometimes mean and self-centered rather than open-handed; the reason a student hands in an essay under their own name that someone else has written; the reason certain thoughts and actions keep recurring in us is because our souls are diminished by sin. The reason we sometimes collaborate with the powers and principalities is because of this power which leads to spiritual death, estrangement from God in time and eternity. You see, it wasn't just collaborating with the Romans and bullying his fellow Jews that made Zacchaeus small in spirit. These actions came out of a soul that had already been diminished by sin. How the sin virus expresses itself is unique in each of us. But there is a bit of Zacchaeus in all of us. We do not live up to what God made us to be. We are not righteous or clean. By nature, we are diminished in soul, shrivelled in spirit. And when we face that we may feel guilty and afraid. It can be hard to look at ourselves in the mirror.

But thankfully, we can stand tall again, not by looking in a mirror, but by looking upon Him whom Zacchaeus looked upon. Now people have speculated about why Zacchaeus was so eager to see Jesus. Some say he must have sensed that Jesus could bring peace to his troubled soul. Well, perhaps. But perhaps Zacchaeus looked upon Jesus' entry into Jericho and the resulting parade as an event from which he could collect more taxes. Tax collectors never miss an opportunity. What did someone say, "We have to walk, so they found a way to tax even the shoes we walk in." In any case, Jesus came to the place where Zacchaeus was, looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for I must stay at your

house today.” Why he singled out Zacchaeus we really don’t know. But he did. Zacchaeus was probably as surprised as anyone. He realized that something greater than a source of taxes was at hand. He made haste, jumped down from the tree and received him joyfully.

Now the grumblers were right. “Jesus has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” We don’t know what Jesus and Zacchaeus talked about but Jesus’ presence had a transforming effect. I wish I could show you a short clip from the “Jesus” film based on Luke’s Gospel. On Zacchaeus’ wall hangs an expensive rug. At the top of the rug is Zacchaeus’ safe. He stands on tiptoe, reaches as high as he can, removes a stone from the wall and brings out a clay jar with his ill-gotten gains. With joy he stands before Jesus and says “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” Zacchaeus hadn’t grown an inch, but his spirit sure had. Jesus’ presence enabled Zacchaeus to stand tall. Jesus lifted him up to his full stature. “Today,” said Jesus, “salvation has come to this house, for he is also a son of Abraham.” By God’s grace Zacchaeus had become what his name implied - clean and righteous in God’s sight.

Now some people said about Jesus, “This man is spending too much time with sinners. He must go!” And according to his plan God allowed the powers of evil and darkness to have their hour. Jesus suffered and died on the Cross in Jerusalem for our sins. He was buried but God’s mighty power raised Him to be alive forevermore. So the ministry of Christ continues among us.

Despite the fact that our souls have been diminished by this thing called sin, Jesus comes to us in love and grace, just as he came to Jericho and to Zacchaeus. The fact that our souls have been diminished doesn’t matter. Jesus comes the way of sinners. He calls us by name and tells us that he wants to stay with us. And when we receive him by faith and say, “Come in, Jesus,” he does. His transforming work starts to take place in you and in me. Jesus’ presence enables us to stand tall. He lifts us up to our full stature as children of God. Through Him we are cleansed, forgiven, made righteous in God’s sight. Christ saves us from the separating power of sin and gives us the hope and reality of eternal life. The world may drag us down and sin may diminish our souls, but the presence of Jesus Christ enables us to stand tall. The presence of Christ in our lives enlarges our souls, and expands our love, so that we can better love one another and God’s world. And on the last day, Christ will raise us from death and present us to the Father, clean, righteous, acceptable to God forever.

Two hundred years ago, a slave ship arrived off the Virginia coast. The slaves walked off the ship chained together and slumped over, with fear in their eyes. But one stood proud, erect, eyes bright, ready for whatever rigours the new world would bring. “What makes that one different?” a bystander asked. “Oh,” came the answer, “in Africa he was a prince and he’s never forgotten that he is the Son of a King.’ You and I are children of the King, loved

and redeemed by Jesus Christ. No matter what the world does to us, Jesus' presence in our lives enables us to stand tall.

And Jesus Christ has come among us today. He is here in the bread and cup by the power of the Holy Spirit. He sees you where you are. Make haste to receive him by faith. Let your heart be a home for Christ to dwell. And no matter what burden you have brought with you, you will go from here standing tall, in the power of God's Holy Spirit. You will go in confidence, with new courage, knowing that you are loved, forgiven, cleansed, empowered to do what God requires of you. This is a new day for you and me by the amazing grace of God in Jesus Christ.

Now you may need Jesus again tomorrow. Most of us will. Just about everyday we need to be lifted up from the world's downward pull. Our souls need to be restored and enlarged again. One man was asked, "Have you been born again?" He answered, "Yes, I have been born again, many, many times." And thankfully it can happen to you and me, just as often as we need it. For just as Christ is passing through our midst today, so he will pass your way tomorrow and the next day and the next. Make haste to receive him and live for him today and every day of your life. Christ's power and presence will enable you to stand tall now and forevermore.