

Streetsville United Church

Sunday, November 03, 2019

Rev. John Tapscott

“LIFTED TO A HIGHER PLACE”

Luke 20:37

A fitness center offered \$1,000 to anyone who could show that they were stronger than the owner of the place. Here’s how it worked. This strong man would squeeze a lemon until all the juice ran into a glass, and then hand the lemon to a challenger. Anyone who could squeeze out just one more drop of juice would win the money. Many people tried—weightlifters, construction workers, wrestlers, but nobody could do it.

One day, a short and skinny guy came in and signed up for the contest. The owner grabbed a lemon and squeezed away. Then he handed the remains to the little man. The crowd's laughter turned to silence as the man clenched his fist around the wrinkled lemon and six drops fell into the glass. As the crowd cheered, the manager paid out the prize and asked the short guy what he did for a living. "Are you a lumberjack, a weightlifter, a football player?" The man replied, "I work for the tax department."

Today we read from Luke’s Gospel of the encounter between Jesus and the tax collector named Zacchaeus. That day Zacchaeus discovered a great truth. Whenever Jesus passes our way, he lifts us to a higher place.

As usual, it was a lovely day in Jericho. Nestled in the Jordan valley Jericho enjoyed a most pleasant climate. The high and wide palm trees caught the breezes and provided protection from the scorching winds that came from the eastern desert. Balsam groves provided a pleasant scent for the city. Blooming rose gardens gave beauty. Servants worked in the fields harvesting abundant crops of balsam and figs. Jericho was prosperous. But nothing moved quickly there, for it was not only an important spot along the trade route, it was a desired retirement place. Also, many priests lived there when they were not on duty in Jerusalem. No, things were pretty laid back in Jericho. It was just too pleasant there to rush around.

But on this particular day rumors spread quickly around the town square and from home to home. “Jesus of Nazareth is coming. Jesus is on his way to Jericho!” Oh, they had heard of him alright. Word of his Galilean miracles and the large crowds that followed him had reached south even to Jericho. Now Jesus was coming here! What miracle, what mighty work of God might he do in Jericho? For pleasant as it was, it seemed that Jericho needed a bit of stirring up. It had been a long time since any walls had tumbled down. Anyway, the people sensed that Jesus’ visit would be short. They’d heard he was heading for Jerusalem, where some thought he might lead a rebellion against Rome. Who knows - maybe it would work, for Jesus really seemed to have God on his side. So the expectant people of Jericho came out to see this extraordinary man of God as he passed through.

Along the main street was an impressive house belonging to Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector. This day he was sitting at his desk, poring over figures and preparing the deposit for his Roman overseers. He was deep in concentration, but couldn't miss the murmurs outside. "Jesus is near." Like the others in Jericho, Zacchaeus had heard of Jesus. Zacchaeus was a Jew too, a son of Abraham. His parents had given him an honoured Jewish name which means "righteous, pure." Zacchaeus tried to be religious sometimes, but that was a hard name to live up to. Zacchaeus realized that the name Jesus had religious significance, too. It meant "God the Saviour. God to the rescue." Sometimes Zacchaeus thought that he needed God's rescue. Then suddenly, as if pulled by some unseen force, Zacchaeus broke away from his books and went outside to join the crowd. But being late and short of stature Zacchaeus could not see over the people. Zacchaeus was a creative man, though. He ran down the street to a sycamore tree, just low enough for him to climb into but high enough to lift him above the crowd. Up he climbed and put himself in a perfect spot to see Jesus as he passed by. Jesus' work in Zacchaeus had already begun. Just the very sound of Jesus' name had lifted Zacchaeus to a higher place. Whenever Jesus passes our way, he lifts us to a higher place.

Now Jericho produced healthy tax revenues for the Romans. But Zacchaeus collected more than the Romans demanded. The difference between what he collected and what he remitted was his commission. That was how the system worked. It worked pretty well for Zacchaeus. He knew how to squeeze out every lost drop. He was rich. But it came to him at a cost. Zacchaeus had few friends in Jericho. He collaborated with the hated Romans. No doubt he employed some thugs to extract taxes from the people, even from the poor. He paid them well and turned a blind eye to their strong arm tactics. The whole thing dragged Zacchaeus down to a lower level. Morally and spiritually he was in a low place. His bank account was full but his spirit was empty.

Now we are not Zacchaeus. Yet we often find ourselves in a lower place than God intends for his children. The demands of life can drag us down. The pressures that this broken, frantic world imposes on us are many and varied. So many people are bent over by burdens and worries and fears. Our spirits can feel heavy. Guilt and grief and hopelessness can weigh us down. Now mental illness and chronic anxiety are medical issues. But they can be spiritual issues, too. These issues have become more prevalent in an age which has largely rejected religious faith and practice. And the world always seeks to drag us down to a lower level of morality. The world constantly tempts us to lower our standards. Many people in this world are brought low by poverty, or drug addiction, or racism or injustice. Sometimes the forces that drag us down originate inside us; sometimes they come from outside. Ultimately all that seeks to bring us low comes from the evil one, who is the source of all human misery.

Zacchaeus was in a lower place than God intended. And Jesus knew all about it. For when Jesus came to the tree, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." Did Jesus come to Jericho just for Zacchaeus? Perhaps. In any event, it had been a long time since anyone had spoken so graciously and kindly to the tax collector. Zacchaeus hurried down and was happy to welcome him. Of course, people grumbled that Jesus had gone to eat in the house of a sinner. But that didn't matter to Jesus. Zacchaeus had fallen to a low place, but he had not fallen beyond Jesus' saving love and power. No one is

ever too low or too lost for Jesus to reach. And something wonderful happened in Jesus' presence. Zacchaeus stood there and said, "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." Zacchaeus repented of his ways and went well beyond what the law required. Jesus brought out the reserves of repentance and generosity that had been hiding in the little man's heart. He brought salvation to Zacchaeus and his household. Jesus made a new man of him, one who could now fulfill his destiny as a true son of Abraham. Jesus lifted Zacchaeus to a higher level.

Again we may not be in Zacchaeus' place. But whenever Jesus passes our way, he lifts us to a higher place. It is happening today. He among us lifting us up, lifting us to a higher level.

Do you know why Jesus can pass this way every Sabbath and lift us to a higher place? It's because he went to the lowest place. The only begotten Son of the Father came into the world in a stable and was laid in a lowly manger. Throughout his ministry he sought out lowly people and those who had been rejected by the righteous - sinners, tax collectors, Samaritans. He showed them that God's healing grace and love was for them, too. And he who was born in a lowly stable died in an even lower place. Rejected by the high and powerful, he was lifted up on a tree called the cross, the emblem of suffering and shame. Yet in accordance with the Father's plan his death was the atoning sacrifice for our sins. He even descended into the lower reaches of hell to preach to the captives there. Then on the third day the Father raised Jesus from the grave to be alive forevermore. So now the ever-living one comes to meet us here by the power of the Holy Spirit. He comes wherever people gather in his name and lift him up in worship. "And I, when I am lifted up, will draw all people to myself."

So Jesus Christ has come among us today. He is looking at each one of us - at you and me with love. He knows the low place in your life and mine. And that's where he is at work. By his gracious, powerful presence he is lifting you and me to a higher place. Lift up your hearts, we say. And we can because he is doing it in us and for us. He is lifting the stress from our souls and replacing it with God's peace and God's hope. He is lifting us up to live as redeemed children of God, who we are through faith in Christ. He is lifting our minds from earthly things and setting our minds on things above. He is lifting us up from the world's downward pull and empowering us to live according to godly ways. He is lifting us into the realm of grace where we know that our sins are forgiven. He is lifting our enthusiasm for service and raising up our strength. He is lifting us up to a new level of love and compassion and generosity. He is opening our hearts to respond to the needs of our neighbours. He is lifting our eyes above the brokenness of this world to catch a glimpse of God's coming Kingdom. In the hour of death, he who is the resurrection and the life will enter into the valley of the shadow and raise us up to eternal life in the Father's house. Indeed, one day Christ will come again openly as judge and Lord. He will lift up the whole creation from brokenness and decay and usher in God's new heaven and new earth.

A man once said to me after worship, "I've felt down for the last couple of weeks. My younger brother died from cancer and it's been really hard. But today I feel much better." Another said to me, "I've been unemployed for a while and very discouraged in my job search. But now I feel encouraged to get on with it again." One more person said, "I've been avoiding a tough situation, putting it off for months. But now I know what to do and later today I'm going to do it." I am

happy when people say these sorts of things to me. It means that Jesus has passed our way, and is working among us by his powerful Spirit, lifting us to a higher place. I'm glad to be used as his messenger. Sometimes we may say to ourselves something like, "Now I see the area where I've been living below where God wants me to be. But today he has given me a fresh start and now I'm going to live in a way that honours him."

Jesus Christ has passed our way today and he is lifting us, you and me, all of us, to a higher place. Welcome him happily as Zacchaeus did. Be strengthened in faith as you receive these symbols of his body and blood. Know that you are a child of God and that salvation has come to this house and to you.