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Luke 19:1-10

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*Endless Love*

A couple of weeks ago I visited the 911 Museum and Memorial in New York City. I'd just read Garrett Graff's powerful book about that day called, *The Only Plane in the Sky*, and I felt I had to go visit the site. Being in the museum, as many of you know, is heart wrenching. What struck me the moment I descended the escalator was the smell of smoke. Was this the power of suggestion, I wondered, or are they pumping smoke into the museum to enhance the experience of those who visit? I've done some research and found no mention of this peculiar aspect of the museum. What I've decided is that it smells of smoke because so many items in the exhibit were burned: fire trucks, stairways, steel beams, walls. Eighteen years later the smoke is as present and real as the stories that are told. We learn and absorb things through our senses, all of them. There's something especially infusing about what we smell because we take it into our bodies and not into our minds.

The memorial that is outside and pictured on the cover of your bulletin this morning was riveting. As great works of art do, it mirrors our feelings and emotions; it gives form to something that we can't clearly articulate, to something we can't express in a particularly rational or intellectual way. For those of you who've not visited the site, the two pools—the largest human made waterfalls in North America—cover the exact footprints of the original twin towers. The water cascades off the walls, onto a flat surface and finally down into a dark well. The endless flowing of water is so reflective of our own deep unbaiting sorrow and tears.

As I stood by the memorial with the early morning sun just peeking around the surrounding skyscrapers onto the pool, I had a very practical problem. I'm not the tallest person on the block and I really wanted to see into the final hole, to see where all that water was going, to see the bottom. But the wall surrounding the pool is deep, holding the names of all the victims and it was chest high on me. Though I tried jumping up, I could not better my view. I've wondered if tall people would be able to see into it and I suspect that they would not. Maybe that's the unsettling, disconcerting intention. There is no end to this sorrow, this shared and borne profound sadness. Much as we might like to reassure ourselves by seeing the delineated boundary, the bottom of the well of tears, we can't. I felt and still feel when I recall it, that the ground I was standing on was shifting sand.

Right about now you may well be wondering what in the world this has to do with Zacchaeus. Bear with me as we look at this story as told by Luke.

There is simply no getting around the fact that the gospel of Jesus Christ is to the poor. The disenfranchised, the lepers, the foreigners the rejects of society are the ones to whom Jesus comes, the ones who need the good news. I don't like to face this. In fact, when I read passages that speak of the rewards of heaven going to those who have been poor in their earthly lives, it doesn't take much of a mathematical mind--which is fortunate because I don't have one---to realize the other end of the equation. Those who have been rich on earth have had theirs already. No, I think, I just won't focus on this right now. I must be able to twist this passage so that it comes out all right for me. As Scarlet O'Hara said, "I'll worry about that tomorrow."

Zacchaeus was not poor. He was rich, really rich. And his wealth was not honestly won. He wasn't just a tax collector, he was head of the IRS, he was Charles Rettig who will, incidentally, collect in the neighborhood of 2.5 trillion dollars this year. All the tax collectors worked for Zacchaeus; he was the chief and aligned with the Roman authority that the Jews viewed with such loathing and suspicion. In the first century the whole system was shady. Zacchaeus took the money, probably kept a sizeable portion for himself and then gave some to the Romans. He was the original Bernie Madoff, a Ponzi scheme impresario, corrupt, greedy and wily. He was a very important, big person, probably a bit rough, but we are also told that he was little, a short person. I can't help but think that if a movie were made of this story, Danny DeVito would be chosen to play his part.

The other lead character in the story is, of course, Jesus who is passing through Jericho. Minor parts are played by the gathered elite, some rabbis, perhaps some disciples, people of good standing in the community.

Hearing that Jesus is coming to town, Zacchaeus is eager to get a look at him. But there is such a large crowd lining the streets through which Jesus will pass that Zacchaeus, vertically challenged as he is, can't see a thing. Kind of like me at the memorial. He's clever and determined and runs ahead and scoots--if you can imagine Danny DeVito or Bernie Madoff scooting----up a sycamore tree to get a better view. You have to wonder why someone like Zacchaeus would want so desperately to see Jesus. From this point on the story is pretty perplexing. Jesus sees Zacchaeus, tells him to come down quickly so that he can go over to his house, have dinner and a sleepover. Zacchaeus probably just about fell off his branch. We're

told that he received Jesus joyfully. This shady character who is in a position of great power, is tickled pink to be noticed by Jesus. Understandably, the crowds are flummoxed. “Hang on,” they say, “What is he doing embracing a sinner?” They do their famous, holier-than-thou-crowd-murmur-routine looking disapprovingly at both Jesus and Zacchaeus.

These are the characters in the story that intrigue me, the people who thought they knew what was right and what was wrong. They have been doing their best, upholding the laws, trying to be faithful, interested in the message this strange carpenter is telling. They have shown up, some to learn, some to be with friends, some to be seen, some to refute, perhaps. A bit like those of us who have shown up here this morning for many of the same reasons. We’re a crowd circling around Jesus, eager to learn what his message has to do with our lives. We all want to know with varying degrees of curiosity and intention, what it would look like to follow Jesus, how our lives might change or unfold. The trouble is that Jesus shakes the ground, the moral high ground, on which we tend to stake our claim. He has a habit of doing this. And we’d be wise to be wary whenever we take a moral stand, because he might just be in the corner sharing some falafel with our enemy.

How would you feel if Jesus singled out someone you can’t abide and eagerly asked to go home with her or him? Acted as if they were buddies, maybe on the same side? What if the person out on that limb were President Trump, Bernie Sanders, Nancy Pelosi or Vladimir Putin? Jesus is over the moon to go to Mar-a-Lago for the weekend. No matter what your political or ethical inclination, it is your perceived enemy that Jesus chooses.

Hospitality was very important in first century Judaism. You can be sure that most of those standing under that sycamore tree had cleaned their houses and prepared a lovely spread just in case Jesus might come to their house. They had preened and cleaned and cooked in the hope that, given their support and faithfulness, they would be chosen. In their dualistic view of the world, there are good guys and bad guys; there is right and there is wrong, the in crowd and the outsiders.

What Jesus does in singling out Zacchaeus is to debunk this way of thinking as he so often does. Where the crowd loathes the tax collector, Jesus embraces him. It doesn’t make sense in our moral order of things. How do you think the crowd felt? They were no doubt shocked, surprised, hurt, maybe indignant and affronted.

When we dare to entertain the humanity of those with whom we disagree and the broader, unifying message of Christ's love that infiltrates all creation and all people, we too can feel insecure and unhinged. It becomes really hard to choose sides, to either attach ourselves to one position or another or, conversely, detach ourselves completely. We can't just simply say, "Life is wonderful and turn a blind eye to disagreements and conflict. We must dare to rest in the shifting, transient space of unknowing. Our egos don't like this at all. We want clarity and affirmation; we want to know where we stand and what we stand for. We want to see the bottom of the well of tears. When we venture into that holy in-between space where we endeavor to see those with whom we disagree, it will inevitably feel unstable and disorienting. This is the space where Jesus dwells and where he bids us venture.

Spiritual practices are a way of resting in this holy in-between space, but if you are new to doing this, it can be unsettling. You sit down to meditate or pray and, if you're like me, feel immediately compelled to get up and empty the dishwasher. Your mind may race to fill the quiet space you are trying so desperately to enter. Eventually, though, by trying again and again to attune your heart and body to this way of being—and calming your monkey mind—you will find yourself perhaps knowing less and sensing more. Some of us sit and meditate, some pray, some do a walking meditation, whatever practice you consider, the key is to show up, maybe just for 5 minutes a day. Christ is already there, waiting to keep you company.

When the crowd saw Jesus call to Zacchaeus and then affirm his transformation and commitment to give some of his wealth away, their world view was shaken. They were confronted with the outrageous idea that God's love really is expressed in welcoming the stranger and loving one's enemies, not from a position of power but from humility, grace and shared suffering and love. They felt rejected, perhaps a new feeling for them.

Our hearts are stirred to this knowing all the time, the trick is to notice it, to wonder about it, to allow ourselves to be nudged into that holy in-between space of not knowing.

I came away from my visit to the 911 site with the smell of smoke inside me. Powerful though the stories, pictures and relics were, it was the pervasive internalized smell of sadness, death and destruction that filled me. Going out into the light and standing by the waterfall, was profoundly moving. Was it cleansing, all that water? Some see it as a restorative symbol, others a clear reflection of our country's endless flow of tears.

What I felt more than saw was the aching soul of a nation, the people lost and the broken lives resulting, the endless grief flowing into that dark hole. But more than that I felt the gentle comfort of shared sorrow and the tenderness of love, a love that cleanses and transforms us especially in pain and suffering: the wellspring of God's redeeming and endless love. It is the core of our Christian faith.

As we observe All Saints Day and think of those who have died for whom we hold deep affection, I suspect there's not one we'd consider all saint and no sinner. Some of you might have been reluctant to offer up a name because you second guessed yourself and thought, "Well, he wasn't really a saint; he had his deep faults too." Try seeing this from Jesus' perspective, he's calling you down from your branch apart because he knows the goodness and love within you and he simply wants to share a meal with you. We are all saints and all sinners and all embraced by God's endless love made real around and within us. And look, Christ's table is set for you; come let's eat together.

Grace and Peace.