

Sermon
“An Invitation”

November 10th, 2019 – First Presbyterian Church
22nd Sunday after Pentecost
Based on Luke 19:1-10

Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “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.” Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

Prayer

God, through the power of your Holy Spirit, open us to your Word that we would hear what you would say to us today; through Jesus Christ, who invites us to welcome him in, even before we are ready or worthy. Amen

Sermon: An Invitation

True confession...I love fairy tales. Just in case high school English was a long time ago a fairy tale is a fictional story that may contain folkloric characters (such as fairies, goblins, elves, trolls, witches, giants, and talking animals) and enchantments, often involving a far-fetched sequence of events.

Perhaps my love for fairy tales has something to do with the number of Grimm’s fairy tales I translated in high school German or maybe with a childhood dream that I was actually a princess. No matter the reason, there’s something about fairy tales that has made them last through the generations and somehow still hold weight for us today. I think there is something about fairy tales that is simply attractive to each of us.

Because who doesn't want to see the Beast transformed by love. Or the island girl travel across the open sea fighting enormous sea monsters and impossible odds in order to save her people. Or the princess to be woken from her sleep by the prince hunting in the woods. Or the prince to find the girl he danced with and who had lost her shoe, but was now locked away in her own home by her evil step mother. Or the princess give endless summer back to her people.

I think we're drawn to fairy tales. Not necessarily because we want to find our own Prince Charming, get married and live in a far-off land...although maybe some days that sounds pretty great too.

But I think we're drawn to fairy tales because we want something in them to be true. We want to believe that lives change be changed, transformed even. We want to believe that our work matters and is making an impact on the world around us. We want to believe that that darkness will not have the final word. We want the impossible to be possible.

And so, imagine with me for just a moment the story we just heard from the Gospel of Luke as a fairy tale. We're introduced to this man named Zacchaeus and we immediately learn a few things...he's short, he's the chief tax collector, and he's rich...and the people absolutely hate him.

You see, as a tax collector, especially the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus was responsible for collecting taxes for the Romans. But tax collectors were also allowed to collect a little extra for themselves, which would explain how Zacchaeus had gained his wealth.

And so, tax collectors were generally disliked because it was assumed that they stole money from others. More specifically, Zacchaeus was hated because he was a Jew, working for the Romans, and collecting taxes from his fellow Jews. So, he wasn't just any tax collector, he was also a traitor.

And then one day, Zacchaeus sees a man named Jesus approaching and Zacchaeus decides that he wanted to see Jesus. But because he was short all he could see was the backs of all the people who also wanted to see Jesus.

And so, taking matters into his own hands, Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd to climb a sycamore tree so that he could just spot Jesus as he walked by.

I appreciate something about this image, because here you have this wealthy man, who was presumably well dressed, and who was probably used to getting just about anything he wanted, who now throws all caution and composure aside and climbs up a sycamore tree simply to spot this man named Jesus. I can just see Zacchaeus, dressed in his finest robes, sitting in a sycamore tree.

And then to Zacchaeus' astonishment, when Jesus got to that sycamore tree, he stopped. And he looked up and he said to Zacchaeus, "hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

It's completely unbelievable!

I'm not completely sure what Zacchaeus thought he might accomplish by climbing up the sycamore tree, I'm pretty sure he didn't think this was going to happen. Because here's this man who has presumably stolen from his friend and neighbors, who has climbed into a tree just to get glimpse of Jesus, who is now going to have dinner with Jesus and at his own house, nonetheless.

At this point, no matter how loudly the crowds grumble and complain that Jesus is associating with lowly sinners and outcasts yet again, we're rooting for Zacchaeus. We want to see the impossible become possible for Zacchaeus.

And it doesn't take long because Zacchaeus immediately jumps down from the tree and proclaims, "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."

And Jesus replies to him, "Today salvation has come to this house."

And so, in just this brief encounter Zacchaeus' life is changed forever. He has gone from wealthy, conniving tax collector to follower of Jesus.

The impossible has become possible.

And what gets me every time is that all Zacchaeus really did was climb into a sycamore tree so that he could just see Jesus. It was Jesus who stopped, stood at the bottom of tree, looked up and saw Zacchaeus and invited himself over for dinner. It was Jesus who took the initiative and then Zacchaeus responded to Jesus' gracious invitation.

But here's the thing. We know this story isn't a fairy tale. Zacchaeus was a real man whose life was really changed when he met Jesus. Zacchaeus' story is the Gospel story.

It's the story that when he couldn't do anything for himself, Jesus found him, and invited himself into his life and then Zacchaeus couldn't help but respond by giving away his riches to the people he had once wronged.

When Zacchaeus climbed up that sycamore tree, he is, at least initially, motivated by curiosity...he simply wants to see Jesus. But Jesus is motivated by love...he wants to be with Zacchaeus.

In other words, Jesus meets Zacchaeus' curiosity with invitation. But that invitation flies in the face of the expectations of the crowd who grumble that Jesus wants to be the guest of a notorious sinner like Zacchaeus.

And for me that's what stands at the heart of the Gospel. Because Jesus didn't wait for Zacchaeus to invite him into his home. Jesus didn't stand at the bottom of tree, look up, and expect anything from Zacchaeus.

Instead, Jesus takes the initiative and invites himself into Zacchaeus' home.

And those actions aren't out of character for Jesus. Time and time again Jesus acts against social expectations and religious decorum by associating with those regarded by others to be outcast or unclean.

And so, by seeking out Zacchaeus in the sycamore tree, Jesus once again demonstrates God's extravagant and unexplainable desire for the lost. But God's love also doesn't end there, God's love is always a transforming love. It leads to lives turned upside down and completely changed.

And perhaps that's why we are so drawn to fairy tales, because they allow us to live in a world, even just for a moment, where that kind of transformation is possible...where all people or creatures are revealed for who they really are. The ugly duckling becomes a great white swan. The frog becomes a prince. The scarecrow gets his brain, the lion his courage, the tinman his heart. The beast even becomes a man.

But that's the Gospel too. Author and theologian Frederick Buechner puts it this way, "The news of Gospel is that extraordinary things happen to [people] just as in fairy tales extraordinary things happen...Zacchaeus climbs up a sycamore tree a crook and climbs down a saint. Paul sets out a hatchet man for the Pharisees and comes back a fool for Christ. It is impossible for anyone to leave behind the darkness of the world [they] carries on [their] back like a snail, but for God all things are possible. That is the fairy tale. [That is] the truth."¹

¹ Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, HarperOne, 1977, pg. 7-8.

The news of the Gospel is that God can do all things. But we've heard it so often that it has become a cliché. We throw it around in difficult situations, when there aren't easy answers, when we don't know what to say, when it all seems impossible.

But I think we forget that the impossible has been the work of God from the beginning of Genesis...out of nothing God created everything. God gave a child to an old and barren woman and then created a nation. God brought that nation out of slavery and into a new land. And then God gave another son to a young woman and through that son God saved the world.

And there's power in that. Buechner goes on to say, "That is the fairy tale of the Gospel with, of course, the one crucial difference from all other fairy tales, which is that the claim made for it is that it is true, that it not only happened once upon a time but has kept on happening ever since and is happening still."²

And that's good news for us. Because it means that it is possible for our lives to be changed too. It is possible that the lives of those we love will be changed. It is possible for the situations in which we find ourselves to be changed even still. It is possible that our illness will end. It is possible for our church to grow and change. It is possible to begin new things. It is possible that the darkness will not win.

And in fact, it's not just possible, but it's also probable. It's the promise of the Gospel.

Because at the end of the day, the Gospel promises that darkness will not win; though it might seem like it in the moment, the darkness has already been defeated and the good news will always win.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Buechner, *Telling the Truth*, 90.