

### **“Lost and Found” – Lk 19:1-10 – Oct 31/10**

Did you see the news item the other day about the “driverless” car? This is a car that drove from somewhere in India to Beijing in China, all without a human driver. Well, almost all – apparently there was one traffic jam where the humans on board needed to take over to navigate through. But for the rest of the journey the car was driven by the onboard computers. It completed the journey in time to be included in a technology fair being held in Beijing.

Of course there was a lot of hype about how this vehicle was the first driverless car – but I have to disagree. I’ve been behind an uncountable number of driverless cars – well, not really driverless, but because the driver is short enough that their head doesn’t come above the headrest it looks from behind as though nobody is at the wheel. I wondered if the driverless car featured on the news shared some other characteristics of the driverless cars I get behind – driving 20 kilometers per hour under the speed limit; failing to make the turn on a green light; no turn signals; and usually heading for the same destination as I am.

While the driverless cars here in Vancouver actually do have human operators, the new one featured on the news was controlled completely by computer software – and doesn’t that make you nervous? An array of cameras provide imagery input for the computer to recognize traffic lanes, signals and signs, and hazards like other vehicles and jaywalkers. But all of those sensors, as good as they might be for making immediate decisions, don’t address the larger questions of “where are we?”, “where are we going?”, and “how do we get there?” To answer those questions a different device is used, and that is the ubiquitous Global Positioning System – or GPS.

I won’t go into all the details of how GPS works, because your eyes would soon glaze over, but suffice it to say that the technology is based on a bunch of satellites in low earth orbit with VERY precise clocks that constantly send out their position by radio signal. Receivers on the ground pick up those signals, and by measuring the teensy-weensy time differences in receiving them are able to calculate with great accuracy the exact distance from each satellite. When the receiving computer has signals from enough of the satellites, it can calculate with great accuracy the exact position on the earth. This technology, a dream only a few decades ago, is now so readily available you can buy handheld units for hiking for less than \$200, and many cars now come already equipped with GPS. It’s easy to tell which ones have GPS – they’re the ones who suddenly, a half-block from the intersection, want to make a right turn from three lanes over in the far left lane!

The concept of the dilemma between knowing how to turn and when or why to turn came to mind as I thought about the navigation pronouncement from Jesus about being lost and found in our text from Luke.

We’re all pretty familiar with this story of Zacchaeus in Luke’s gospel, partly because of the way Luke includes human-interest details. We can easily picture Zacchaeus bobbing up and down in the back of the crowd, trying to catch a glimpse of Jesus, and finally climbing a sycamore tree. Not just any tree, but a sycamore, Luke tells us. I don’t think there’s any special significance to it being a sycamore tree other than by including that little detail Luke generates instantly in our mind a fairly complete picture of the event. Luke adds another little detail to complete the picture, a detail that is surprisingly enigmatic: “because he was short in stature”. Now we instantly assume that Luke meant that Zacchaeus was short, but the original Greek can just as legitimately be read that it was Jesus who was short in stature. We’re not happy with that, are we? Indeed, the early church had some ongoing discussions about whether or not Jesus was short. I’ll bet you’re squirming in the pew right now just because I’m mentioning that Jesus might have been short, as if that would make a difference about him embodying the power of God within himself. Of course Jesus had to be tall – and fair-skinned, with blue eyes ... isn’t that exactly how we remember him from the pictures in our Sunday School books?

In any event, Zach scoots up the tree, and the rest is history. Jesus calls to him by name, invites himself and the gang over for supper and to stay the night. Zach is well pleased, but the crowds not so much. There is much mumbling and grumbling about Jesus hanging out in the house of a chief tax collector, and a rich one at that. The tension and the conflict rises, as the people clearly saw Zacchaeus as having gotten rich off their backs, and as being not just a toady of the hated Romans but even a sinful collaborator. Jesus' behaviour in not only associating with such a sinner was radical enough, but to actually stay over at his house was bordering on the dangerously scandalous.

However, even more than being a story of tension and conflict, this is a story of radical, even outrageous, behaviour by Jesus. Not only did he stay at the house of a sinner, he pronounced Zacchaeus as a true 'son of Abraham', as fine a compliment as one could pay to a Jew. More even than that, Jesus declared that salvation had come to his house – which would include all who lived there. And to justify his radical actions, Jesus made a proclamation, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." That's pretty radical, isn't it, for one who is One with God? Not to sit imperiously passive in some religious institution waiting for the lost to not only find themselves but to then find him, but to be actively engaged in a Search and Rescue operation, seeking the lost, and saving them. This is an extremely radical story of mercy and grace!

And who are the lost he is seeking? We all are, or have been, or continue to be from time to time. Not primarily the physically lost, although I'm sure Jesus has been involved in the rescue of many who were physically lost. We who live in Vancouver, and especially on the North Shore, know how easy it is to take a wrong turn on a trail and become hopelessly lost in minutes. Many tourists don't recognize the danger, and become quickly and seriously lost without proper clothing, food or water.

Some people who are lost are able to call attention to themselves by lighting signal fires. I can't help thinking of the scene in the movie "Cast Away", when Tom Hanks finally gets a fire going on the beach, proclaiming loudly, "me, I have created fire!" Sometimes such attention-getting is disastrous for the lost person, and even others. A few years ago a hunter who was lost in California lit a fire to draw attention to himself – and created the largest wildfire in California history, burning over 100,000 acres and killing 15 people in the process. Sadly though, more often the attention-seeking fires lit by the lost are self-destructive behaviours that consume their whole being.

The lost of whom Jesus is speaking when he declares he has come to seek them and to save them are the spiritually lost, those who for whatever reasons have either drifted from or worse yet been pushed away from a warm and sustaining relationship with God. These lost are those who have lost direction, lost hope, lost purpose, and are unable to find their own way back into a meaningful relationship with God, and often with other people as well. These lost will sometimes also signal for help, often with self-destructive behaviour that isolates them even further from those who want to retain their sense of righteousness through separating themselves from the unpure. That is a vicious spiral, one that ends in lack of life, certainly lack of the abundant life promised in Christ, and too often in death.

There is, however, thanks be to God, a source of help for us as we join the Search and Rescue team that carries on with Christ's mission to "seek out and save the lost". This source of help is what I call "Christian GPS", and was developed as part of the Reformation – which is appropriate to acknowledge since today is Reformation Sunday. The Reformers felt that the whole church had gotten 'lost', drifting away from the original message of repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation with God through his grace in Jesus Christ, and becoming lost in a tangle of church rules, regulations, politics and corruption.

This “Christian GPS” is useful not only for helping the lost once they are lost, but can also help people avoid getting lost in the first place. Instead of “Global Positioning System”, however, the GPS here stands for “Gospel Positioning System”. In the “Christian Gospel Positioning System” we have a spiritual navigation system that reminds us of just how close we are to God – close enough that He would send his only Son to rescue us; with constant reminders of His grace and mercy, assuring us that even when we feel lost and alone and separated from God, his Holy Spirit continues to act as a beacon, giving us both impetus and direction to return to Him.

The Christian GPS developed during the Reformation was a renewed respect for and broad personal use of the Scriptures, the very place where we find the written ‘maps’ that trace the paths of the early Israelites as they moved toward God; the very place where we find the descriptions of the paths that Jesus trod as He moved toward the cross and beyond in his Resurrection; the very place where we find enough detail to draw maps of the travels of the apostles as they carried the good news of God’s saving action in Christ to the whole world. The Scriptures form the foundation of our Gospel Positioning System, and give us survival instructions of all kinds, including the story of the divine Rescuer who knows us every bit as well as he knew Zacchaeus, and who is able to find us in our lostness, and call us by name as well, and invite himself to dwell within us. Our Scriptures provide us with a Search and Rescue manual as well, with instructions on how to find the lost by clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, comforting the lonely, healing the sick. Instructions on how to gently guide the lost back into the warm, friendly and reassuring ‘recovery tent’, and indeed on how to make the church be such a recovery tent.

“The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost”, Jesus proclaimed, and seek out and find the lost he has done, including us. Now it’s our turn and opportunity to carry on that rescue mission, taking what we learn in Scripture of God’s grace and mercy in Christ, and carrying the message of rescue and redemption like a searchlight, that all who are lost may be found and welcomed back into the bosom of our Lord and Rescuer Jesus Christ.