

### **“Show Me The Way” – Lk 19:1-10 – Nov 3/13**

I'm beginning to wonder just how large a percentage of our population couldn't find their way home if a solar storm knocked out the GPS satellites. Or perhaps a military emergency – the satellites from which all GPS devices get their position information have the capability of being turned off with the push of a button in some bunker, and worse yet instantly changed their information so that you now seem to be half a kilometer from where you actually are. Whether it will be the drivers of cars who after hogging the left lane for miles suddenly need to merge three lanes over into the rightmost lane because Silicon Sally or Silicon Sam has just intoned, “turn right at next intersection”, or the people who walk across the street against a red light with their face firmly buried in their iPad or phone, I suspect that a significant portion of our society now would be totally lost without a device to tell them how and where to go.

Thoughts of such people being totally lost came to mind as I read the final word ‘lost’ in this passage from Luke. I'll go into that in more detail in a bit, but when I first read the closing sentence “For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost” I started humming the tune to the old song “Show Me the Way to Go Home”, and as with all good ear-worm songs I haven't been able to stop hearing it in my head all week. (Maybe now that I've given it to you I'll be rid of it!)

Anyway, let's take a look at Luke's story in some detail, and reveal the much deeper meanings he conveys through it. 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 or fig-mulberry 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, although one could I suppose stretch the point to its extreme by claiming that Luke was alluding to a despised man climbing up out of the gutter just as one would ascend up to the Temple, but I think that's pushing it a bit too far. Simply by including that little detail Luke generates instantly in our mind a fairly complete picture of the event.

And then with his fabulous talent for weaving a great story out of an 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.”

At first that seems a fairly innocuous claim, helping to save the lost, doesn't it? We could be a bit religiously blasé about it all, kind of a religious “ho hum.” But I discovered an interesting link through this particular word ‘lost’ that leads back to Ezekiel 34. The prophet Ezekiel passed on some fairly strident criticism from God about finding and saving the lost sheep of Israel, and in particular some really harsh criticism of the shepherds – and it is abundantly clear that the shepherds that are being castigated are the clergy and the political leaders of the day. The charges against the shepherds there are numerous and damning, claiming that “You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. <sup>4</sup> You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them.” The Lord goes on through the prophet to declare, “<sup>15</sup> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. <sup>16</sup> I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice.”

And so when Jesus claims that the Son of Man; i.e. himself, has come to do just that, he is making a very, very strong claim. Moreover, that's a pretty radical concept, 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 one of the largest wildfires 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 are the people 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 sadly too often in death.

There is, however, thanks be to God, a source of help for those who are lost. That help is Christ himself, alive and active in those of us who ourselves have been at one time lost. Just as Christ came as the Son of Man to seek out and find the lost, now we have the opportunity to “show me the

way to come home” to others. We can do this in two very meaningful and effective ways; the first is to proclaim the love of God in Christ, to tell and retell the “old, old story” of Jesus and how he came to seek the lost, to bring back the strayed, to bind up the injured, and strengthen the weak. Those who are lost need to hear this message, and those who have been lost and have been found will want to recount it.

The second meaningful and effective way we can “show me the way to come home” to others is literally to show it, to demonstrate the way of Christ in our own lives, to show the same kind of acceptance and invitation that brought Zacchaeus and his whole household – men, women, children, servants, slaves, saints and sinners alike – into a reconciled and renewed relationship with God and others. Early Christians were actually called “People of the Way” and there was a reason for that, in that they demonstrated the way of Christ in their lives. We now in turn are invited by Christ, just as Zacchaeus was invited by Christ, to come down off any lofty perch we might be sitting on, to come down into the streets and stores and coffee shops and demonstrate the love of Christ that fills us to overflowing. Each of us can say that Christ did “show me the way” and now it’s our turn. Thanks be to God and Christ that we have that opportunity.