

Seeing and/or Believing
Luke 18:31-19:10
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Luke is nothing if not consistent....persistent some might say. Last week in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, we reflected that the Rich Man could not, would not, see Lazarus as a fellow human being, could not believe he was anything other than a slave or a servant.

Seeing and believing are front and center again today. Jesus is mere days away from Jerusalem and so the stories start coming fast and furious. Perhaps that's why we get three different stories in almost the same number of verses as last week's parable.

Throughout his journey to Jerusalem, where already religious leaders plot against his revolutionary talk and immoral association with the wrong kinds of people, Jesus has been telling the disciples what is going to happen. He will be killed and he will demonstrate the divine power of love over death. But time and again, and again, they don't get it. They can't see it. They can't believe that this is what this has all been about. Maybe they still believe he can fix the political system by a show of power. Maybe they think his miracles will finally melt the hearts of Roman and the Sanhedrin's religious leaders. Jesus tells them, 'I am going to Jerusalem because I am the Messiah,' although he doesn't say it in so many words. But the 12 disciples are depicted a bit like the stupid house-husbands of Nazareth, or the buffoons from a first century reality show, "Galilee Shore." Jesus tells them everything and their response is, um, what Jesus? We don't get it.

I don't know about you, but the disciples make me feel better about not being the perfect Christian. If they were WITH Jesus, actually witnessed the miracles and THEY can't seem to muster up enough faith to believe what he is telling them, then perhaps our doubts don't seem so ridiculous or unfaithful. Maybe that's a reminder that Jesus wasn't starting a religion, but proclaiming a new world order, where it's not about doctrine, but about community, hospitality, putting our trust in God. And it's about choosing sides to journey with Jesus and not claim we're in charge.

But then, dog gone it, then we get that blind man. The Blind Man sees who Jesus is. There, on the edge of the town, Jesus is going past a blind man who wants to know what all the fuss is. It's that Jesus they say, the one doing all the healings. And he, the blind man who has never met Jesus in his life, calls out, "Son of David." Now, the people who first heard this story would laugh out loud because "Son of David" was the shorthand used by Jewish prophets to talk about the coming messiah. So, the 12 disciples, who Jesus tells everything to, who have seen him performing miracles and have sat in on his teaching every day for three years, are totally clueless. The blind man sees in an instant who Jesus really is and, as a result, his sight is restored to him. He sees with his mind and heart who Jesus is and that leads to him being healed. But it's told in a way that is supposed to make us laugh -- dumb disciples, smart blind man.

So with that setup, we turn to the wee little man so many of us sang about in Vacation Bible School. The story tells us that Zacchaeus was a tax collector but it's not like he worked for the IRS. The way taxes were collected back then, the guy with the power -- that would be Zach in this case -- knows that under Roman law, you owe three denarii. So he comes to you and he says, okay, cough up your taxes, either give me five denarii right now—Rome's cut and his percentage or you can pay me two denarii a month for the rest of the year. In other words, he was making a fortune off of others and not off of his own work. He was using his power to take advantage of others, not generating or creating anything; he was just taking and with the Roman goon squads there to respond to anyone who doesn't pay up.

But, like many mid-level bureaucrats, he always wants to be in the know. He hears about this Jesus guy and he wants to see him. And he wants to be seen by him, so he climbs the tree.

More than likely, one of the reasons Zach couldn't see wasn't just that he was short, but because the people hated him. They weren't going to make room for him in the front to be able to see. And why should they? He was taking their money, in cahoots with the Roman occupiers and he was a jerk. So why should they help him?

But Jesus saw him anyway and even though it would make him unpopular with some folks, Jesus said, "Zach. I'm going to come to your house today." Jesus wasn't going to let Zacchaeus being a jerk get in the way of what he wanted to do. So Zacchaeus was seen by Jesus, was welcomed by Jesus, and chose to welcome Jesus in return. It is as though their mutual acts of hospitality suddenly clear his vision. The blind man could see and so he was restored to a full life. Zacchaeus is granted a vision of who he had become and, in the person of Jesus, he has to confront the person whom God wants him to be. And that vision is so powerful that he repents of his cheating ways and promises to give back all the extra money he'd squeezed out of folks over the years.

Zacchaeus becomes a fair man, a decent person, who doesn't try to take advantage of others because he is seen, because this helps him see who he is meant to be.

If only it worked that way. If only the petty little people who seem hell bent on exploiting the poor, the powerless, the huddled masses yearning to breathe free could see themselves through divine eyes. But maybe it's not our job to judge the failures of others when plenty of times we have the blindness of disciples to what is right in front of us.

There is a condition for the inability to see things close up. Ironically, it's called presbyopia. Others call it "old eyes." Some have suggested that the church of Jesus Christ today has more than its fair share of presbyopia, not able to see right now, only able to see the past -- a wistful vision of the church that once was when pews were full and the world more predictable, or only capable of looking with fear and trembling at the distant future—either only fixated on our eternal home or on a fearful world where the church has crumbled past irrelevance to oblivion and raccoons and squirrels and real estate developers are the only ones interested in going into churches anymore.

The joke is that the cure for presbyopia is either better eyes or longer arms, and today Jesus demonstrates both in his encounter with Zacchaeus. Jesus may have a vision for what's coming in the future but it doesn't blind him to what is right in front of him.

He reaches out to the one others would reject and he sees Zacchaeus not as the man he is, but the man he was meant to be, the man he could be. He doesn't see a wee little man; he sees one who has been twisted by power and the quest for wealth into someone others might hardly recognize. But Jesus overcomes any presbyopia he might have and sees the Zacchaeus of the end of the story. And in reaching out to him, in letting Zach know he has been seen, warts and all, he is still worthy of love. He clears away Zacchaeus' own presbyopia, his own blindness to his need of grace and of repentance and renewed relationship with the people around him.

We are all invited to see Jesus today, to see this son of God who looks at us and says, "I'd like to come to your house today, and I'd like to share a meal with you. I think you are special and worthy of the life you have been given." And, if we can see that Jesus, who welcomes us, who wants to be with us, just as we are, knowing all the things we are certain others can never know about us, then perhaps, like Zach, we can also see who we are meant to be. We can see that we can be welcoming like Jesus; we can be loving and fair and we can make amends where we need to when we have wronged others. And we can seek to live the lives we are given. Who knows? Some day we might even have the faith of that blind man, and when we encounter Christ in the faces of strangers and friends, we'll see him clearly and reach out in love. And we will follow, walking in his ways now and always. May God make it so. Amen.