

Twenty First Sunday after Pentecost
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX
30 October 2022

Luke 19:1-10

The story today reminds me of the characters made famous by Victor Hugo in his famous novel, "Les Misérables". We can say that no one is as broken, and lost in pain, anger, loneliness, poverty and staggering sadness as the protagonist, Jean Valjean, prisoner 24601. After serving 5 years for stealing a loaf of bread to help his sister's family, and 14 years for repeated escape attempts, Valjean is released on parole. Forced to show everyone his yellow parole card, he was automatically seen as an outsider, a dangerous criminal, a sinner. He was one from whom men hide their faces, a lawless sinner. On one particularly cold evening, a Bishop by the name of Muriel provides lodging for Valjean. In the middle of the night he roams around the Bishop's house and steals his silver. Soon after, he is arrested and brought to the Bishop's house for identification. The Bishop tells the police that he had given the silver to Valjean as a gift and informs Valjean that he was a fool for not taking the candlesticks as well, as they are worth much more. This act of love and kindness moves Valjean to the core, and from that point on he vows to make himself into a better man. The Bishop's act of grace, his ability to look into Valjean's face and see his humanity transforms Valjean's life. Valjean is spared additional prison and becomes a true protagonist, sacrificing his entire life for the protection of a poor orphan named Cosette. This small action of compassion and grace liberates Valjean from his crushing anger and hatred and transforms him into a courageous and just man.

Today we have a similar story in the Gospel of Luke. A cunning, ambitious, profit-driven man by the name of Zacchaeus lurks in the background trying to catch a glimpse of Jesus, the famous Galilean preacher. By all accounts Zacchaeus is a sinner in the eyes of faithful, Torah-obedient Jews. He was a betrayer of the nation by the mere fact that he collected taxes for Rome, he was a sinner because he exploited others for profit, he was considered a thief because he defrauded others, and he was considered a religiously impure man because of his profession. Even though Zacchaeus was wealthy, in the eyes of the Jews of the day he was as unwelcome and as unlikable as Valjean was in Victor Hugo's story. To make matters worse, this man was very short. He was so short he could have been the rector of Saint Dunstan's. (Go ahead, it's OK to laugh! I know I am short.) Anyway, he was so short that he could not see Jesus, so he resorted to climbing a tree to get a better look.

The Gospel tells us that Jesus entered Jericho and when he came to the place where Zacchaeus was, He looked at him and he said, "hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." Jesus looked up and saw this man. While others are trying hard to avoid him, Jesus purposely looked up and saw him. Then Jesus spoke to him. The one others despise, and don't want to be seen with, is precisely the one Jesus is looking for.

Jesus says, "I must stay at your house today". The expression "I must" almost indicates that Jesus is under compulsion to do this. He is being obedient to a commission given to him. He not only wants to do this, but he must do this. It is people like Zacchaeus that Jesus is here to see, to liberate from their pain, to rescue and to heal. He has come into Jericho in search of the chief sinner and having found him, he decides to dine with him. Those around him grumble, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." This is the same type of grumbling the police engage in when the Bishop saves Valjean. The Bishop has gone crazy! Why is he giving this thief his silver? This is insane. He should have handed him over to be returned to prison!

Jesus makes it very clear that "the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." This was no accident. Jesus didn't just happen to be in the same place as Zacchaeus, he sought him out. He looked for him. It was him he was coming to see. This gesture is so significant that Zacchaeus exclaims, "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." Zacchaeus was lost, but now he is found. Jesus has come to save the lost. And to me this sounds like Good News for you and for me.

Today and tomorrow, all over America and other parts of the world, children and adults alike will put on masks and dress themselves in a variety of characters. Today childhood fantasies become a reality and, as we play act, we momentarily become the people we wish to be. We become powerful heroes, we get extra human strength, we become smarter, we become invincible, we become able to fly, and able to live forever, even if it is as ghosts, vampires, or zombies. But my friends, I believe that we all wear masks all year round and not just at Halloween. Many of us wear the mask of respectability, a mask that hides feelings of inadequacy. Many of us wear the mask of moral superiority, perhaps to hide our own fear. Many of us wear the mask of intellectual superiority, perhaps to mask our ignorance or our insecurity. Many of us wear the mask of humility, only to hide our arrogant thoughts and predisposition.

We all wear masks to appear better than we are, and even though these masks may have a use in inter-personal relationships, these masks do not work when it comes to Christ. Christ knows how we are when we first get out of bed in the morning and he is not repelled or appalled. He knows the motivations of our hearts and, rather than walking in the opposite direction, he seeks us out and longs to have a relationship with us. Christ knows how we look without the mask and loves us anyway.

My friends the good news today is that we don't need to appear taller than we are to see Jesus (although I do enjoy preaching from up here!) In fact he is the one who is looking for us and he rejoices when he finds us, because he came to earth to save broken people like you and me. We don't have to appear smarter, more righteous, more interesting, or even more religious, Jesus finds us as we are and he offers us all the gift of his grace and his love. What we are now is enough for him!

But we cannot stay as we are. Being found by Jesus requires that we choose to alter our lives. It requires that we choose to change like Valjean and Zacchaeus chose to change. We are welcome as we are, but we cannot, we must not, stay as we are. Today Christ invites us to come as we are, to accept his free gift of grace, to allow ourselves to be found, to enter into relationship with him. But we are also invited to change. To become the people God wants us to become. To commit ourselves to amend our lives. Christ knows that we are broken, but he also knows that with his help and his grace we can become the people he intends us to be. May this be so, and

May God continue to bless you, Amen!