

When the Faith Overwhelms the Fraud [Scott Kinder-Pyle]
Luke 19:1—10

People get tired. People get tired for a whole host of reasons. But I'm wondering today about the fatigue that sets in when we can no longer project the image we want to project, when the facade we like to show in public falters or when our egos have been battered and bruised so much, we construct a wall to keep others from getting too close and knowing how we've been hurt.

Spiritually-speaking, people get tired. People exhaust themselves in trying to portray a version of themselves that's just not real. And I'm going to start off this morning by suggesting that Zacchaeus has been one of those people. And he's one of us.

Today, of course, is the day after *All Saints Day*, and in one of the hymns that we're going to sing later the lyric that chokes me up is—“*For all the saints who from their labors rest, who thee by faith before the world confessed...*” And so, I wonder about those ‘labors’ and if some of that work didn’t involve scrapping of the facade—or the deconstructing of the walls that separate us. Anyway—the song continues: “*We feebly struggle; they in glory shine...*” And so, I believe they do. And so, I believe we will. But not before something in our veneer, in our surface lives, begins to show signs of wear and tear.

- Zacchaeus, as many of you know, was a ‘*wee little man...*’
- But he was also the chief tax collector in the border town of Jericho.
- And so, I do wonder if he wasn’t always compensating and overcompensating for that lack of stature.
- Moreover, I also wonder if he wasn’t always compensating and overcompensating until Jesus just happened to pass his way.

Before I got off *Facebook*, during the hullabaloo associated with the Covid crisis, one of the more encouraging messages I received was from an old high school friend, named Ed. Ed was the goalie on our soccer team; and he was a good athlete. But dark and stormy teenage night, when I met him at the *MacDade Mall*, he told me and my friend, Kevin that he was picking up his check. He was picking up his check from the *ALL-ATHLETIC* store, where every high school jock wanted to work. And so, we did what all good, trusting friends would do, we went to the store manager and asked if Ed worked there; and he said No... Now I don't know why he felt as if he had to put on this facade, but there it was. And we lived with this joke for decades. Until in 2021, when I read Ed's post—in which he confessed that through the years all his bragging and posturing had left him really, really, really tired.

You see, being a fraud takes a lot of work; and ultimately, it's just not worth the effort—which brings me back to Zacchaeus and how he climbed a sycamore tree because he was desperate to see Jesus. Why? Why bother? Why, if you're content with being recognized as the chief tax collector, does he risk going out on the literal limb? And, of course, that's a good question for you and I as well. Am I? Are we content with just milling about in a crowd of spectators? Do we show up at church hoping to blend into all the other faces? Are we genuinely happy, singing about '*Jesus, Jesus, Jesus*'—WITHOUT SEEING HIM AS HE SEES US? My gut tells me I'm tired of that kind of feigned enthusiasm? Moreover, given what we've heard today in the passage from Isaiah, it seems that God might be tired of it too?

***“Hear the word of the Lord:
'What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?
I have had enough...’”***

A lot of us here have been raised on *The Wizard of Oz*. And you remember what happens when Dorothy and the Scarecrow, and the Tin Man and the Lion go to see the Wizard. All he is is a broken-down carnival worker who was trying to impress the crowds with his hot-air balloon. And yet, as the story goes, the citizens of the City of Oz are so impressed with his apparent other-worldliness, they defer to his fake authority... Dorothy's little dog, of course, isn't so willing to go along with the show. And when Toto pulls back the curtain, the jig is up: *'Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain! I am the Great and Powerful Wizard of Oz...'*

Come on! This morning, I suggest, we're hearing about Zacchaeus at the tail end of his fraudulent wizardry. And the reason he's up there, in that tree, has more to do with how tired, how fatigued, how exhausted, he is with the whole life of transaction. Think of it: if everything in your day-to-day existence has become a matter of buying and selling, paying your taxes, collecting your dues, feeling gypped or taken advantage of, eat or be eaten—if that's what gets your blood pumping in the morning, eventually, inevitably, ultimately, we're going to be depleted. And yet—what if Jesus enters the scene then? And what if he's not the 'Jesus' you can buy or sell like a bobble-head doll? What if he's not the bumpersticker Jesus you can stick on the fender of your really expensive car? What if this Jesus, just now, passing through your days and your nights is the One who sees how tired you really are... ***"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."***

Now we don't know much about what happens next (except for the grumbling of the crowd).

But I'm going to quote Brian McLaren here and refer to it as a sort of dialogue-dance.

“Instead of conquest, instead of a coercive rational argument or an intimidating sales pitch or an imposing crusade or an aggressive debating contest where we hope to ‘win’ them to Christ, I think of it like a dance. You know, in a dance, nobody wins and nobody loses. Both parties listen to the music and try to move with it. In this case, I hear the music of the gospel, and my friend doesn’t, so I try to help him hear it and move with it. And like a dance I have to ask if the other person wants to participate. There’s a term for pulling someone who doesn’t want to dance into a dance: assault. But if you pull someone in who wants to learn, and if you’re good with the music yourself, it can be a lot of fun” [*A New Kind of Christian*: 62]

Zacchaeus of Jericho and Jesus of Nazareth are having a lot of fun in Luke 19. Even as the crowd of people outside are grumbling, the pair of them are enjoying the conversation... and that’s when I picture this fraud of a chief tax collector really joining the dance. He says in verse eight: ***“Look, half of my possession, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”***

Wow! That’s sort of amazing, isn’t it? On so many occasions, in and around various churches I’ve seen it go the other way. My congregation in Ohio hosted a Vacation Bible School. And there was this professor from the local college who had had a conversion experience with Jesus; but he was used to throwing money around, and he was accustomed to getting people to listen to him. Anyway, that summer he volunteered to teach the children in Vacation Bible School, and in order to get the kids to memorize Bible verses he rewarded them with crisp dollar bills. Of course, they took the money. But I wonder if either the children, or the adults who taught them really helped them dance to the music of the gospel. You see, of course, I can be a Big Fish in a Small Pond. Of course, I can give money. Of course I can join a Bible Study. Of course, I can say all the right words in the middle of a crowd. But do I?—do we?—risk, letting Jesus see us, call me down and dance to the tune of justice, mercy, compassion and love?

“Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. In other words, just as Abraham was *blessed to be a blessing to all the families of the earth*, so Zacchaeus, for all his fraudulent finagling, is now in the process of channeling that same BLESSING. Faith, when all is said and done, overwhelms a lifetime of Fraud. Another wall in Jericho has come down. How about here at Northwood?

I’m fascinated with what Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote as he was imprisoned in a Nazi Death Camp. Even at the very end of his life, Jesus has him by the hand and he’s dancing:

“Who am I?

... Am I really then what others say of me?
Or am I only what I know of myself?
Restless, melancholic, and ill, like a caged bird,
Struggling for breath, as if hands clasped my throat,
Hungry for colors, for flowers, for the songs of birds,
Thirsty for friendly words and human kindness,
Shaking with anger at fate and at the smallest sickness,
Trembling for friends at an infinite distance,
Tired and empty at praying, at thinking, at doing,
Drained and ready to say goodbye to it all.
Who am I? This or the other?
Am I one person today and another tomorrow?
Am I both at once? In front of others, a hypocrite,
And to myself a contemptible, fretting weakling?
Or is something still in me like a battered army,
running in disorder from a victory already achieved?
Who am I? These lonely questions mock me.
Whoever I am, You know me, I am yours, O God.?”