

October 31, 2010

**The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost**

Luke 19:1-10

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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**Zacchaeus at Halloween**

I know there is quite a bit of excitement in the air today and it is not because we are observing the twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost in Ordinary Time. There is nothing 'ordinary' about All Hallows Eve. The ancient Celts knew it as *Samhain*, a festival marking the end of summer and thought to be a particularly 'thin' time, a time when it was possible for the sprits of the otherworld to pass back and forth to this one. Ancestors were invited home and evil spirits warded off. In time this memory was adopted by Christians preparing to celebrate the Saints and Souls who had gone before. So here we are dressing up as goblins and ghoulies and things that go bump in the night.

I heard a radio interview with the owner of a costume store who assured us that 'the classics' were still the most popular costumes: pirates and witches for adults; superheroes, princesses—Disney and otherwise, and costumes from the rock band 'Kiss' for children. Classic indeed. What did not get a mention was the idea of going out trick-or-treating as Zacchaeus—a truly scary tax collector. (I know some of you were wondering how I was going to get from Hallowe'en to Zacchaeus, and now you know.)

This story of a despised man finding himself convicted and being led to repentance and newness of life in the presence of Jesus is not simply a story of a notorious sinner finding faith, but is once again the story of the walls coming tumbling down in Jericho. Just as in days of old when God would not be stopped by fortified boundaries, so now, Jesus brings down any possible walls of resistance that he might encounter with Zacchaeus. "Hurry and come down; for I *must* stay at your house today." This tax collector would still have a long way to go before he is accepted by the whiners in the crowd and before he has dealt, in any way, with the consequences of his actions in the past. But he has made a start. I imagine it was slightly controversial when he did the equivalent of showing up at church the next Sunday, head held high. But, for us, he becomes a sign that the deepest divisions—even enmities—can be overcome with real humility in the grace of God.

With this sign in mind, I've been worried by polls that suggest that almost 60% of Americans view Muslims with suspicion. The problems that ensued for the journalist Juan Williams who admitted discomfort at seeing Muslims boarding an airplane have to do with policy decisions at NPR and Fox respectively. What Mr. Williams said, however, clearly resonated with a lot of people in this country. I had a conversation with a friend who has established an Interfaith Center in Richmond, Virginia. He thought that we should be doing more to understand basic tenets of Islam. I countered that I thought that was fine, but that what we really needed to be doing was finding ways to *know* and befriend Muslims. Certainly personal relationship will be part and parcel of moving

beyond enmity and suspicion. Jesus stayed with the tax collector. Part of the breaking down of barriers was *personal*.

Before we get romantic about this new unity being a simple matter of God's grace alone, think about the salutary tale told by a man called Gary Burge in a recent *Christian Century*.<sup>1</sup> Burse participates in an Evangelical-Muslim conversation and frequently travels to various academic settings in the Middle East. On a recent trip a student opined that those who did not follow Islam were wrong and should be either stopped or punished. Conversation followed fast and furious but the opionator appeared unmoved by the argument. As the class ended, Burse noticed five scarf-wearing young women surrounding that man to continue talking. When he arrived back at O'Hare Airport a Pakistani taxi driver said it was hard to live where not everyone followed Islam, and where corrupt Western values—like bikinis—were wrong and must be stopped or punished. He ended by remembering those women surrounding the illiberal man in his class. My words for his conclusion are that the barriers will only be broken down by personal relationship in a circle of influence, however much policy surrounds and supports those relationships.

Of course in order to engage in relationships that are challenging to us, we must know something about who we are and be able to act out of that knowledge with confidence. We know that we are Christians and so we spend time and resources teaching our children, the practices and stories and life of our tradition. We spend time and resources deepening our own appreciation for our faith, seeking to keep it lively and life-giving, even as we find safe places and groups of friends among whom we can grow. And we — increasingly—pay attention to those challenging relationships near and far that help hone our sense of who we are.

I want to mention one critical contributor in addition to personal relationship that makes possible the bringing down of walls that keep us separated and alienated from God and one another. We need to acknowledge that we have developed ways of negotiating between our differences as a matter of society. The democratic process is not in the Bible as such, but it is a mechanism by which we can hope to avoid the kind of rigid extremism that cannot cope with difference. Every two or four or six years we have the chance to affirm or renegotiate how we are to be together, what is just, what makes for peace and so on. We cannot admit of difference without some such mechanism or we are condemned to everlasting warfare between opposing rigidities or simple dominance by one group imposing its power on another by some means of force. An important practice of being a citizen in a country that ensures that we are free to worship in relative peace is the practice of voting and I hope that you treasure this right and this privilege which is part of how we can hope to continue as a worshipping community growing in faith by engaging God and neighbor.

The story of Zacchaeus is about the possibility of the unimaginable happening in the grace of God. This radical change did not happen without work on Zacchaeus' part and it happened over, and in spite of, the grumbling of others. This story is also the story of

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<sup>1</sup> Gary M. Burge, 'Tackling Intolerance' in *The Christian Century* (October 19, 2010) p. 10-11

real, reasonable and holy hope for a world marked by rigidity and enmity, that such hatred is not the last word. The last word for today is that “the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.”

May we respond to the gospel in silence and in prayer, perhaps acknowledging those of whom we are suspicious or whom we fear, and asking grace to be relieved of those fears through growing friendship in God’s good time. Let us pray