

“When Hindsight isn’t quite 20/20” – Reformation Sunday, October 30, 2016 (Luke 19:1-10)  
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The scripture tells us that “in order to see Jesus, Zacchaeus ran on ahead, then climbed the sycamore tree that was along the route.”

This morning I wonder what prevents us from seeing Jesus.

What prevents you from seeing Jesus? I promise this is not the beginning of a joke about the Ascension. [I looked and there aren’t any good Ascension jokes out there.]

What prevents you from seeing Jesus? Anything?

The crowd was too dense, so in order to *see* Jesus, Zacchaeus ran ahead, and climbed a tree...

It was a milling crowd of people who, the story insinuates, looked down on Zacchaeus physically, just as he looked down on them in the social standing from his place as a rich tax collector.

What prevents you from seeing Jesus? What distracts your attention? What crowds you in? What stands in your way? What rests in the line of site *between* you and Jesus?

I know some of you might answer: “Well, it’s those cell phones. It’s tablets and iPads and the constant need to bury faces in screens. It’s music constantly blaring in earbuds and the ever-present company of television. It’s full calendars and to-do lists and the to-do lists for our to-do lists...”

Maybe that’s true. We live in a culture of distraction, to be sure.

Maybe every one of those things is true. But when I ask, “What prevents you from seeing Jesus,” I can’t help but wonder if some of you might answer that it’s the

church... That if you look deep down and discern the answer resting way down in the pit of your stomach you might look me dead in the eye and respond: “The church prevents me from *really* seeing Jesus. The church hinders my vision of the one who stood with those on the periphery. The church.” The dogma. The rules. The theology. The judgment. The history. The division. The attacks on women and the LGBTQ community and anything that isn’t somehow deemed normative by whatever privileged power gets to name such things at any given time. The church.

I know that some of us have struggled with the church. Some have even written church off entirely. At some point maybe you wrote the church off because the church wrote you off. Perhaps you were judged, demeaned, even sentenced – all in Jesus’ name.

Or maybe you’ve read the multitude of historical books about the church; you’ve seen how the church has acted over the centuries. You understand the role that church missions played in the 1490’s, which eventually led to the decimation of entire cultures here on this soil; cultures whose remnant today (this morning) still struggle for the preservation of what’s left of their sacred lands.

Do you think there are times the church has prevented you from seeing Jesus?

I ask you today, with this story about Zacchaeus as our frame, and wonder what Martin Luther’s answer to that question may have been just about five hundred years ago.

Martin Luther, who, in an effort to help give society a personal connection to Jesus through worship – instead of through the abstract intermediary of church hierarchy – wrote this piece inspired by a Psalm that says God is the fortress that protects us... that the mighty structure is not the institution of the church, but God, AND however YOU experience God and God’s love and protection.

It is not, “A mighty fortress is our church.” It is not, “A mighty fortress is our government...”

Martin Luther wrote: “A mighty fortress is our *God*...”

It was a way to make God’s presence and protection known.

Luther’s concern was, in part, that the people of his day... were... prevented... from seeing Jesus. The introduction of congregational singing and a Bible translated into the common tongue were basically ways that he planted and nurtured a sycamore tree, which he then invited Christians to climb up in order to see Jesus – to have a personal relationship with Jesus through the inspiration of congregational worship. Luther’s detractors – the ones who really saw what was unfolding – were recorded as saying: “The *whole* people are *singing* themselves into his doctrine.”

What did we learn from the Reformation? That Christians can disagree to the point of bloodshed? That families can be torn apart because of opposing viewpoints? That pointing fingers and defining ourselves against something (PROtest-entism) makes God’s abundant and unconditional love seem somehow hypocritical?

In her book about Emergent Christianity, Phyllis Tickle writes that one of the most pivotal questions that came out of the Reformation was this: “Was the church capable of being wrong? Yes,” she writes, “It was that simple and that devastating.”

Has our tradition learned anything from its judgmental violent past? Is hindsight really 20/20?

There are many mainline Christian churches that have given up Reformation Sunday. Perhaps rightly so. Because it shouldn’t be about celebrating division – and it certainly shouldn’t be about upholding the violence that came in its wake.

And, while that may be the case, pausing to reflect today does give us an opportunity to look back, with the *luxury* of hindsight, and consider how far we've come and how far we still have left to go. And we have come incredibly far. We protestants tout ecumenism as our thing, but did you know that "A Mighty Fortress is our God" – what some call the "battle hymn of the Reformation" – is now printed in the Catholic Book of Worship?

We pause to recognize in order to learn from our past, so we might continue to build the kingdom of heaven on earth, in order to strive for a more beloved community.

And as we are led into the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the posting of those 95 theses, we reflect on the social upheaval that was present in the 16<sup>th</sup> century and how it mirrors the upheaval of which we are intimately aware today. It wasn't just a matter of some list of grievances being nailed to a church door. Society was changing. Technology was changing. The church was changing. Martin Luther or no Martin Luther.

As society changes around us; as technology changes around us; as the church changes around us, we should ask ourselves: What have we learned from all of that? What's left to learn? And where can the presence of Jesus be anticipated, experienced, seen?

Phyllis Tickle outlines the great changes that have taken place just about every 500 years since the First century. She warns that in the midst of this 21<sup>st</sup> century Emergence, we find ourselves at another five-century mark. She recalls that none of the previous schisms in the Christian church have come without bloodshed, divided families, and a society changed forever.

Perhaps climbing the tree in order to see Jesus is actually a matter of gaining deeper perspective in order to REALLY see one another. Like Zacchaeus, we are called to run on ahead, to do the work of climbing the sycamore and, as we move up from branch to branch, to recall a teacher who said, “When you feed the hungry, and clothe the naked, and care for the sick – when you meet people and welcome them in their need – then you are welcoming me. You are seeing me, my presence in them.”

Perhaps we would see that in a time of Emergence, we could learn from hindsight, and love one another beyond division and see – really see – Jesus in all of God’s people. Perhaps if we take a firm hold on this new time of Emergence, we can do work that is mending and not divisive.

This is all well and good... but if there’s one thing we might learn from hindsight, it’s that there comes a time we can no longer agree to disagree. It has come with Catholic and Protestant; it has come with American Baptist and Southern Baptist; it has come here to our very door with the formation of the Evergreen Association.

And these splits – and I am not denying that they’re necessary, and I am not denying that they are just – these splits eventually come at the expense of love. And it’s not the moment we separate ourselves from each other that our vision of Jesus begins to blur. It’s the moment we lose our capacity to love each other.

Perhaps, as we learn to overcome division and hatred and violence, when we pull ourselves up from the crowd and scramble up the branches, when we climb up out of the crowd of people, up out of the social construct, up out of the norm... perhaps Jesus will see us, too. Because we have to ask ourselves: if Jesus came back today, would he even recognize the church that continues in his name?

So perhaps by gaining perspective out over the world that crowds us in we will also allow ourselves to be seen by Jesus.

Because the story of Zacchaeus is not about Zacchaeus seeing Jesus – it is about Jesus seeing Zacchaeus. It is about Jesus seeing Zacchaeus and calling him by name.

On this Reformation Sunday, perhaps the real question is not if Jesus would see you or me and recognize *us* and call out to us. The real question is if Jesus would see the church and recognize it at all.

Maybe, just maybe, if the church gathered together and ascended the tree of history, the tree of life, Jesus might see us and call out to us and say: “Take me to your house. I’m going to eat with you and stay at your home today...” And in that meeting, as we really considered the history of our tradition, Jesus would give us a second chance (much like he gave that tax collector). Perhaps our collective response would echo that of Zacchaeus: “Here and now we give half our belongings to poor people. If we, the Church, have defrauded anyone in the least, we will make restitution fourfold.”

Last week I was so struck when Gary Davis was talking about Companis and all of the wonderful things Companis has done and continues to do. And he said: “These are the good works that happen because we come together.” Not *when* we come together; *because* we come together.

As we recommit ourselves to these good works of grace – and experience that grace, ourselves – perhaps Jesus will say to us: “Today, salvation has come to this house, for this is what it means to be children of God.”

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So, what prevents you from seeing Jesus? Well... maybe life. Maybe the church. Maybe you see Jesus just fine; maybe you see Jesus when you look around this sanctuary.

What's really important, and what you should never forget, is that *you are seen*, and you are called by name, and you are valued, respected, and loved beyond measure.

I know it will continue to be so.

Amen.