

“When Someone Believes in You”

Psalm 119:137-146; Luke 19:1-10

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

January 14, 2018—2nd Sunday after Epiphany—Rev. Ronald W. Botts

Our Gospel account today from Luke tells of Jesus and a man named Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus wasn't well liked and it's not hard to understand why. As a tax collector for the Romans he was seen as a collaborator and opportunist. Zacchaeus was relatively well off, but he paid a stiff price for this by being ostracized by his people. He was an outcast in society as surely as any thief would be.

Yet here is a man who, upon hearing that Jesus is traveling nearby, does a most unlikely thing: he runs down the street and climbs up a tree to see better—certainly undignified actions for a man of his privilege. Perhaps people laughed at the little tax collector as he hurried to his wayside perch. They probably hoped that he would fall and kill himself. Serve him right!

Imagine the surprise, the anger even, of the crowd when they see Jesus stop to acknowledge this ludicrous man in the tree. Beyond simply noticing him, Jesus speaks directly to Zacchaeus and further invites himself to his house. This is an overture the man would have never dared to make to such a holy person. “Come down,” Jesus says, “for I must stay at your house today.” Zacchaeus is so astounded that he scampers down from the tree and takes Jesus immediately to his home.

The crowd grumbles as the two make their way through the streets. Zacchaeus stops suddenly and blurts out, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, will I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” Perhaps this even surprises Zacchaeus to hear himself saying these words because money, clearly, is a strong motivator in his life.

But note the order in which things happen in the story. How things unfold is really crucial to understanding here. It is not Zacchaeus' offer to change that softens Jesus to him; rather, it is Jesus' reaching out to *him* that brings about a change of heart in the man. Jesus extends himself to a despised tax collector and makes him feel worthy—perhaps for the first time. It absolutely changes his life.

It isn't at all rare for persons to feel ostracized in life, cut off from the support and esteem needed for positive development. I came face to face with that situation through being a foster parent under the juvenile court. These were short-term placements, averaging six months or so. All the kids had problems; that's no surprise.

Teenagers try our souls sometimes, and these challenging teens perhaps more than most. I was younger then, a lot younger; I don't know if I could rise to the challenge today. They can wear you down!

Annie came to us at fifteen, the oldest of three children in her family. She was also the only one to have ever been in trouble. The schools and the police knew her as a habitual truant and a runaway. In elementary school her grades had been above average, but by when she

came to us Annie was failing everything. At best, she was considered to have a serious attitude problem; by many, she was considered to be truly incorrigible. Her father was a truck driver and her mother worked in a manufacturing plant.

Jim was seventeen, a senior in high school, who liked to smoke pot and had been charged with possession twice. We learned to check our antique mantle clock regularly in the parsonage, which soon became a favorite hiding place for his stash. The courts considered him a rebel who defied authority at every turn. Jim was smart. He did acceptable work in school when he was there, when he tried, or when wasn't sent home for violating some rule or another.

Jim had an older brother in college and a younger sister at home. His father was a white-collar professional and his mother was a nurse. They lived in a nice house in a newer subdivision at the edge of town. From the outside looking in, they probably seemed to be an ideal family. From the inside looking out, the situation was far different.

These were both troubled kids and, fortunately, they both weren't with us at the same time. We lived in a smaller city then and, because of this, I knew something about both families—although from a distance. Annie, like Jim, came from an outwardly stable, but internally dysfunctional family. In both situations there were long-standing relational problems between the parents which spilled out to the children.

Annie and Jim were alike in that they both acted out the problems of their families. They exposed a secret that was supposedly well-hidden within, but they turned it inward on themselves. To others, **they** were the problem in two nice families but, in many ways, they were the result of those families.

Both of these teens were good kids and sensitive individuals, though they tried to cover this fact with a hardened "I don't care" attitude. They were good actors, fooling others and perhaps even themselves. They were alike in that they both were intelligent, full of potential, and profoundly unhappy. I liked them, and I really think they liked both of us. That didn't mean they behaved.

Their downfall was their sensitivity. If anything, they perceived life too clearly. They, of all the family members, were most affected by the disparity between the way things seemed to be to others and the way they actually were. They had the most trouble living with this good family/bad family reality. Neither could stand hearing their families praised as models, while knowing anger and animosity was always there at home just below the surface.

When they tried to heal the family wounds in the limited ways they could, they were most often put down for their efforts. Both sets of parents protected their denial of home problems by stifling the one child in each family who understood that something was terribly wrong. Perhaps it wasn't intentional, but Annie and Jim felt rejection, which they interpreted as their not being good enough. And they dealt with this label in the only way they knew how in their adolescence: they ran away or turned to drugs.

These kind of perceptive children, who are actually smart and strong, often see themselves as dumb and weak. They are put down by parents because they know the real problem in the family, and by teachers and other adults because of their defiant actions. So why didn't their

sisters and brothers react as they did? Probably because they weren't pained as much by this imbalance between appearance and reality. Either their awareness was less or their tolerance greater. And then there's the difference in personalities and in birth order and other factors.

For Jim and Annie they were too sensitive to let things go unnoticed. Their blessing was their curse. So the problems of others ended up becoming their problem as well. They were the lightning rods of their families. Only after they got zapped repeatedly and finally came to the attention of the court, did their parents even begin to confront their own shortcomings.

I learned over time what finally brought about a change in Annie and Jim. It was to be taken seriously in their assessment of home life and be able to talk about this and other life concerns.

Another thing that led to change was crucial as well. They came to feel they had "second" parents who believed in them and cared about them. Now we had to confront them frequently on their self-destructive behaviors and it took a while for them to begin to live out of their positive side. Slowly, though, they began to smile more. We loved them and did our best to show it. Maybe we entered into this naively to think they could change, but they did change over time.

When they were accepted and made to feel good about themselves, there was now a reason for a significant change of direction. What ultimately reinforced this emerging, responsible self in them was that they returned to a healthier situation at home than when they left. Court-ordered family counseling started to bring about positive changes for both families.

The last I knew Jim was preparing for college and Annie, who was academically behind, had all her high school credits finished halfway through her senior year. That was years ago now. I can only hope that life turned out well for them.

When someone believes in you, even when you don't believe in yourself, it can make all the difference in the world. This is what Christ did over and over again in his ministry, and often reaching out to people who believed themselves beyond that possibility. Like Zacchaeus. They may have thought little of themselves because others shut them out of "acceptable" society and regarded them as permanently beyond redemption.

Jesus surprised the people then, and still surprises us today, by declaring that his ministry is especially to the lost and those without hope. Even they, he declared, even they can have a place in the kingdom of God. Inclusion is not defined by race or nationality.

Yes, I wonder about what kind of lives Annie and Jim are living today. They're probably parents, or even grandparents, by now. Perhaps our paths will cross again some day and I'll find out. But this I learned from these two who were called "delinquents" by some: when love reaches out to a cold heart and will not let go, it can bring out love in return. When people believe in us, we begin to believe in ourselves.

That's the way God meets us through Christ. That's the way we are shown to reach out to others.