

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
November 7, 2021 – All Saints' Sunday
Luke 19:1-10
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There is “something” about Jesus. Something that draws people, calls people, leads people, changes people, saves people. Even people like Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus “was a chief tax collector and was rich.” During the life of Jesus, Judea – the area including Jericho and Jerusalem – was under Roman administration. The Roman government imposed taxes on imports, exports, produce, and other necessary items such as salt. Taxes were not collected through a government bureaucracy, as ours are. The job of collecting taxes was farmed out to private enterprise. A person would bid for the right to hold this job by promising a certain amount of revenue to Rome. For his own income, the tax collector was able to keep anything he collected in excess of the bid amount.

This meant several things. The only way you got the job was to bid higher than anyone else trying to get it, so you were under pressure to produce enough revenue to keep the Romans happy and keep your job. And if you wanted to make a good income, you'd have to find ways to squeeze as much money as possible out of the people. Chief tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, had other men working for them. He was like the boss of a protection racket. The fact that he was rich meant that he was “good” at what he did.

Tax collectors were despised by the Jews. They were seen as dirty collaborators with the Roman regime and exploiters of the powerless. Their corrupt practices were well known. Zacchaeus “was a chief tax collector and was rich” – a chief thug among thugs, a chief sinner among sinners. Not the sort of person we might expect to want to see Jesus so much that “he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him” as he was passing by. We don't know what motivated Zacchaeus, perhaps nothing more than curiosity about this man whose reputation had been growing throughout Judea.

We know that Jesus spotted Zacchaeus and made a strange request: “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus gladly and turned his life around. He promised to make reparation for stealing from the people. In several books of the Hebrew Bible there are commandments outlining what a person must do if the person has taken property belonging to someone else. In the book of Exodus, for example, we read: “When someone steals an ox or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, the thief shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep” (Exodus 22:1). In promising to “pay back four times as much” as he has taken, Zacchaeus is confessing that he has been a thief and that he is willing to make the reparation the Jewish law requires of him. Not only that, he offers to give half his wealth to the poor, meeting the greater and higher commandment to care for those in need. And Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

This is a wonderful Gospel lesson for All Saints' Day. Today we celebrate people whose lives have been visibly touched and changed by Jesus. Some of them have become “famous,” like Saint Francis. Many – most – are known to only a few people, perhaps to God alone. All have responded to that “something” about Jesus. What is it for you?

Is it Jesus the healer? The Gospels are full of accounts of Jesus healing people. He stretched out his healing hands in compassion for people suffering from physical disease, from blindness, paralysis, epilepsy, people who had suffered for years. He healed people of madness, restoring them to their right minds. He even brought his friend Lazarus back to life, calling him from his tomb. Does Jesus the healer draw you?

Or perhaps it is the forgiveness Jesus offers to people who have lost their way and turned back. The Parable of the Prodigal Son may express this best. No matter how far we have gone from God's ways, no matter how selfish we have been, if any spark of sorrow sends us back, God will welcome us with joy. Does this teaching of Jesus draw you?

Jesus spoke out boldly and at personal risk against wrong. When the religious leaders misrepresented God, judged others unjustly, and burdened people with religious rules, Jesus didn't let it go. He spoke his mind in no uncertain terms, with passion. And he took up the cause of the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the stranger, all people in need of compassion. His Parable of the Sheep and the Goats teaches that God will judge our souls on the basis of our compassion in action. Is this the "something" that draws you to Jesus?

Or maybe it is Jesus the man of prayer, the man who turned to God in his need. Jesus prayed all night long before he made the important decision about which twelve men he would call to accompany him in his ministry. When he was weary from the demands of the crowds who followed him, he left the disciples and spent time with his heavenly Father. When he was in agony over the death he was facing, he prayed fervently in the Garden of Gethsemane. Does Jesus call you to God through his life of prayer?

Jesus was a rabbi, a powerful healer, a miracle worker, full of God's Holy Spirit, and he taught his followers deep humility. On the night before he died, he acted out his teaching by washing his disciples' feet, giving them an example to follow, an attitude to take to heart for their transformation. Does the Master teaching humble service draw you?

Or perhaps it is Jesus holding out a way of life that is good and not evil, much as he did for Zacchaeus. In Jesus' presence and in his message the Kingdom of God has always come near to people. His presence and his message call for a response. Will we follow him, letting him take the lead in our lives? Will we ignore him and go about our business as usual? Will we mock him, betray him, and reject him? Jesus shows us God's way, a way out of selfishness, malice, revenge, greed, a way out of the hurtful ways of the world. Is that the "something" that calls you?

Jesus suffered and died on the cross. How many of God's saints have been drawn close to God and inspired to live differently through contemplation of Christ's suffering and death? Three days after his death Jesus was raised from the dead. How many people have lived faithfully and given much, supported by the hope found in the resurrection of Christ? Have the cross or the empty tomb or both called you to Jesus?

There is "something" about Jesus. Something that draws people, calls people, leads people, changes people, saves people. Even people like Zacchaeus. Even people like us. Wherever we are, Jesus calls us and invites himself into our lives, into our homes, into our church home, St. Columba's. Jesus comes among us in so many ways – in the Gospel stories, in the Eucharist, in one another, in the church. Like Zacchaeus and like the saints we celebrate today, may we respond to Jesus' call and happily welcome him. And may our Lord say to us the words he spoke long ago to Zacchaeus: "Today salvation has come to this house." Amen.