

Sermon for Sunday, August 25, 2024

Acts 2:44-47

I Corinthians 12:1-13

Luke 19:1-10

Matthew 12:46-50

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

This week we shift our focus from loving God with all of our heart, soul, mind, and body to loving our neighbors, always remembering that loving our neighbors is loving God and vice versa.

For today's sermon I am going to begin with the text from Matthew, move to the Zaccheus story from Luke 19 and then turn to the Acts text.

2000 years ago, and still today in certain cultures, family was the only safety net that a person had. They were your medical and old age insurance policy. From the perspective of a person who had an accident or a serious illness: family was necessary to provide your care until you recovered. From the perspective of the non-injured person; these commitments were considered your first responsibility. Before any other consideration your priority was to take care of the members of your family. It was well established that if you failed to live out your responsibilities your family system would breakdown and fail.

So when Jesus taught his disciples that he had a new mother and brothers he was being culturally disruptive in the extreme. This teaching was radical! To name non-familial followers as his family was unsettling and in some ways very risky because it was rejecting your "insurance policy." You could ALWAYS count on someone in the family to help you when you had a problem because blood was thicker than water. Now Jesus is saying that the ties between his followers were stronger than even the familial relationships that EVERYONE in the culture counted on. Radical teaching from Jesus in the book of Matthew.... *(Pause)*

Let's move to the story of Zaccheus. We are told that he was a "chief tax collector." Culturally he would have been regarded as a traitor and an outcast because of this job. We honestly have no idea if he chose that job or was coerced/forced into the task. Two things are certain: first it was assumed that you earned your living by collecting more taxes that were actually needed and then

skimmed off the extra. The Romans expected it. Secondly: the religious authorities saw tax collectors as Jewish sinners and outside of Jewish law. The result was that tax collectors were shunned both culturally and religiously. Nobody wanted to have anything to do with them. Most people would avoid contact with Zaccheus unless absolutely necessary.

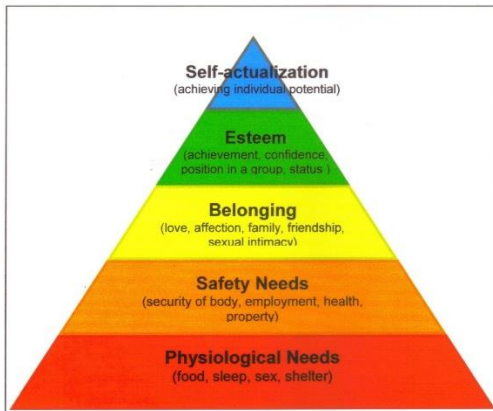
From the way the story is told something was stirring within Zaccheus. Perhaps he was looking for forgiveness and thought he might receive absolution from Jesus. Perhaps he was tired of being isolated and looked to Jesus and his disciples for a new group of friends. His joy knew no bounds when Jesus said, "I'm going to your house today." Jesus invites Zaccheus into the circle and his isolation diminishes. He begins to find a new support system and his joy knows no bounds.

Isolation is not good for humans. Humans need a community of family and friends in order to survive. We need someone to drop us off at the airport, or watch our kids, or help with a home repair, or ... We all know times when we just need some help. While there are many points that can be made from the Zaccheus story, that's the one I want to make for today. *(Pause)*

Let's turn now to the passage from the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Acts. As we do so we are exposed to evidence that the earliest Christians crafted/created new systems of support for themselves. Why? Likely because in those very early years following Jesus often got you kicked out of your family unit. Many (although not all) of Jesus' earliest followers were Jewish. The religious authorities were aghast at the way Jesus was upsetting the long-established Jewish purity laws: laws that defined if you were "in or out." Jesus set an example that included inviting all kinds of questionable folks into the group.

Consider how radical their lifestyle was: all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all as any had need....they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts." Friends, let me say clearly, this is a communal lifestyle. Here in the United States we have been taught for decades that living a communal lifestyle of this sort was bad. Yet in contrast to our cultural expectation we also recognize the value of mutual insurance companies: groups of local people banding together to take care of each other when the need arises.

Within the framework of a mutual insurance company we recognize our obligations to help one another. Now in that context think about just who it is that we call upon for help. The earliest participants in the Vasa Spring Garden Mutual insurance company were the folks living in the neighborhood: and we know how Swedish they were. They were a pretty similar group of folks: Scandinavian immigrants who risked a great deal to start a new life in Minnesota. They had common experiences that made it easy to ask each other for help. And that spirit continues today: as you look around you see friends and family and you know them well enough to ask for help. It's easy to love these folks because they are "our comfortable neighbors."



In 1943 a psychologist by the name of Abraham Maslow published a paper detailing a hierarchy of human needs. The most basic needs are physiological: food, sleep, shelter. The next level are labelled safety needs: security of body, employment, health, and property. The third level is called "belonging." Words describing this level include love, affection, family, and friendship.

Consider that according to Maslow's hierarchy people need to have a sense of belonging. There needs to be love, affection, family, and friendship. In Jesus' culture of 2000 years ago, the ideal would be that one would have all of these needs provided through one's family of origin. But what if you were forced to leave this family? Then what? Well, that's when those early followers of Jesus started banding together to take care of each other. They became "family" for each other and made sure that the lower orders of need were supplied.

What kind of Christian teaching should we take out of these readings for today? Over the last 8 years I have gotten to know many of you pretty well and it is clear that you recognize the power of being a member of a church family. We are a group of people that cares for one another. We do what we can to take care of each other. And if you think about it a minute you realize that you are in the middle of a group of "comfortable neighbors." And you could even say that you care about or "love" these comfortable neighbors.

That's good because it's good practice. When you grow up in or live as an adult with a group of people that you are comfortable with you recognize what love looks like and you also know what to do or how to act in ways that demonstrate love to these friends: these comfortable neighbors. But my friends all of this is practice to get us ready for the hard thing that we are going to talk about next week: how do we love our uncomfortable neighbor?

Jesus modeled love for both comfortable and uncomfortable neighbors. And even though he made a startling statement that seems to reject his family of origin in the reading from Matthew, we must also remember that he made specific accommodations for his mother as he hung from the cross. (A story which is told in John's gospel.) From the point of view of the religious authorities, Zaccheus was an uncomfortable neighbor. Jesus saw him as a comfortable neighbor and as someone who needed to hear about God's specific love for him. The text from Acts provides an example of how early followers of Jesus demonstrated love for their comfortable neighbors. But we must admit that this group of comfortable neighbors had probably been cast out of their families and synagogues and become "uncomfortable" neighbors for those who sent them away.

Next week my friends, the theme will be "loving our uncomfortable neighbors" This is the great challenge of our world and we are going to have to give Jesus' mandate to "love our neighbors as ourselves" serious consideration.

Let's pray: help us Lord. Help us to demonstrate love for you through our love for our neighbor. Be with us as we strive to put this into practice this week. Amen.