

April 11, 2021

“Lost & Found”

John Wesley United Methodist Church

Luke 19:1-10

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It's been said that of the many thousands of words in the English language, the three most difficult words for us to say are, “I was wrong.” “I was wrong.” On the other hand, three of the most delightful words in our language for us to hear are, “I love you.” “I love you.” And today, I would propose that three of the most important and perhaps exhilarating words in our language are the words, “I am saved.” “I am saved.”

Now, expressed in one word – ‘salvation’ effectively means the full rescue of someone who is lost or in danger. The word carries with it a twofold implication. First, that there is someone who requires help and needs to be saved. And second, which is most important, is that there is someone who is willing to help, to be a savior. We've all seen examples of how this has worked, and how it hasn't. Just recently an elderly Asian woman was attacked on a New York City street while some security guards in an adjacent building did nothing to help her, and they subsequently were fired for their inaction. We've also seen incidences where someone gets trapped in an auto accident and passersby, complete strangers, stop to extricate that person at their own risk of harm. Or search and rescue teams are sent out to find and save someone who is missing, lost. Maybe some of you have experienced a medical issue, and you felt that the doctor and medical team saved your life. You can well imagine how being in danger and then experiencing your life being saved is, like I said at the beginning, probably nothing short of exhilarating.

Now, of course, up to this point, I've been speaking about the salvation, or rescuing, of a person's physical being. But as we all know, “salvation” also concerns our spiritual being, our very souls. And I think we need to ask ourselves, are we lost and in danger in this regard? Let's consider. Professor Robert Gromacki in his book, *Salvation is Forever* lists the following reasons why we may be lost and in danger. We are lost because we ignore the teachings in the Bible. We are lost because we disobey our own conscience. We are lost because of our relationship with the world. We are lost because our relationship with God is not where it should be. Do any of these four conditions touch a nerve? Let me repeat them. We are lost because we ignore the teachings in the Bible. We are lost because we disobey our own conscience. We are lost because of our relationship with the world. We are lost because our relationship with God is not where it should be. And after thinking about it, I might even add two more

reasons. One is from last week where I inferred we are lost because we are ruled by fear, and another is that we are lost because we have a distorted sense of self. So my guess is that all of us are lost to some degree or another.

There's an amusing anecdote about Dr. Albert Einstein being lost. We all know him to be a genius, but he was also legendary for his absentmindedness. Apparently one day Einstein was traveling from Princeton, New Jersey, where he taught, by train. The conductor strolled down the aisle punching the tickets of each passenger. Coming to Einstein, he waited as the great scientist reached into his pocket looking for his ticket. But it wasn't there. He reached into another pocket, but it wasn't there either. So Einstein looked in his briefcase but he still couldn't find it. Then he looked all around the seat he was sitting in and – no ticket to be found. Finally, the conductor said, “Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. We all know who you are. And I'm sure you bought a ticket, so don't worry about it.” Einstein nodded appreciatively and the conductor continued on down the aisle. He was ready to move on to the next car, but he looked back and saw the scientist was now down on his hands and knees looking under his seat for his ticket. The conductor rushed back and said, “Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, please don't worry about it. I know who you are. You don't need a ticket because I'm sure you bought one.” Looking up at him, Einstein said, “Young man, I, too, know who I am. What I don't know, is where the ticket said I'm going.” Amusing, yes, but the truth is, no matter what our IQ, we have to be sure of where we're going, especially when it comes to spiritual matters and our salvation.

So let's see what today's scripture can teach us about this. Zacchaeus was lost, though my guess is that he wouldn't admit it. Here he is – not just a tax collector, but chief tax collector, meaning he made money by extorting not only from the common people, but from lesser tax collectors as well, making him very wealthy. Now, since after our Lenten Journey Through the Bible we learned to put context to scripture, let's put ourselves in Zacchaeus' shoes. We don't know much about him, but we know he is short. Probably very short - he had to climb a tree in order to see Jesus. And so perhaps, just perhaps, because of this he was taken advantage of or bullied as a child, not able to “measure up” to the bigger boys. And so he needs to find ways to make himself important, powerful, even it means working for the hated Roman government, cheating others. Zacchaeus falls into some of those “lost” categories I referred to. He ignored the teachings of the Bible, like “Thou shalt not steal.” He had a relationship with the world – wanting money, power, control. His relationship with God wasn't where it should have been. And because of all that, he had a distorted sense of self.

Until Jesus comes along. And invites himself into Zacchaeus's life. And when Zacchaeus is confronted by Jesus, he realizes just how lost he really was. But that's the thing about Jesus – his salvation is based on the fact that the God who formed us out of his love will never abandon us no matter what we have done or what we have become. Instead, he will rescue us. And Zacchaeus realizes he is forgiven and he is loved, he is accepted, he is a son of Abraham, a child of God, just like you and like me. And I can imagine his first words to his friends and others being, "I am saved!" "I am saved!" He has met his Savior. And he makes restitution – his life is changed.

And at Easter, we acknowledge Jesus Christ as our Savior. The one who came specifically to bring good news to the poor in spirit, to rescue those held captive to sin, and give sight to those blinded by their relationship with the world. To be a Savior to us, who are lost. And just look at the word "Savior." It comes from the Latin, "Salvator," a term that refers to one who brings healing. That's why our word, "salve" is closely related to the Latin "salvus," meaning health. So with Jesus as our Savior, our soul is healthy, we are in a living relationship with God.¹ We are saved. That's why the empty cross is a symbol of our salvation. It reminds us that Jesus is the victor. The victor over death, over sin, over evil, over fear, over anything that threatens our spiritual being. Jesus is our salve, our salvation. You know, most Christians think salvation is related exclusively to the afterlife. Salvation is when we die and go to heaven. To be sure, scripture is concerned with our eternal fate. But salvation isn't just a destination, it is a way of life here and now.

Our scripture lesson today about the lost Zacchaeus being found by Jesus reminds me of a more modern day story told by Bishop Will Willimon when he was at Duke University. He says, "A student told me that since she had come to college, thought deeply about things, taken a religion course, and now was majoring in philosophy, she had been able to grow up, live her life quite well without recourse to such infantile notions about God, and... had even put God behind her. She's lost I thought. But I told her, 'Okay, give it a try. Get all grown up and liberated and adult and fossilized if you wish. But as you journey, you better keep looking behind you.'" Because, just as we learned today, it's no small thing to be loved by the Son of Man who came to seek and save those who are lost. Our Savior, Jesus Christ. Alleluia! Amen.

¹ Robert Barron, Lenten Gospel Reflections