

Sunday, October 31st, 2010

Proper 26, Year C

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour, Mill Valley

Sermon by Br. Karekin Madteos Yarian, BSG

Good morning! What a pleasure to have been asked to visit with you this morning and to spend time in worship with the community of Our Savior in Mill Valley. My prayers have been with you for a long while and I hope that from today I shall remain in yours.

My name is Br. Karekin and I am a member of the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory, a religious community in the Episcopal Church. And I am pleased to have an opportunity today to tell you a little about my life in our beloved community.

I have to admit that I was extraordinarily happy to be asked to preach today, especially when I read the Gospel lesson for the morning, the story of Zacchaeus. It is one of my favorite Gospel stories, particularly because I believe it is the story of vocation. The vocation of a man who was called away from a life of isolation and separation into a life of service to others. So I wanted to take some time this morning to unfold this story in a way that might let you have a little insight into my vocation as a brother in the Gregorian Way. And to prepare the way in your hearts and minds to answer whatever vocation might be planted in your spirit waiting for an invitation to inspire your hearts to action.

Zacchaeus, chief among tax collectors, has climbed into a tree to catch a glimpse of the Lord Jesus walking by. Chief among tax collectors, or as they are referred to elsewhere in the Scriptures, a publican.

The publicans in Roman times were not the most pleasant of characters. They were, more often than not, crooked and deceitful men. They were fabulously rich, which is why they were usually hired by the Romans to collect their taxes. They had the money to invest in the imperial system and were able to capitalize on their wealth to make more wealth - almost always off the backs of those from whom they were responsible to collect the taxes for the Roman government. They were despised and shunned by their communities, not just for collaborating with Roman occupiers, nor for merely collecting taxes which the Jews, much like modern Americans in our current climate, found abhorrent. But because the choices they made for their own security and power and comfort caused them to not only abandon but even to abuse the neediest among their own people.

I imagine Zacchaeus, climbing that tree trying to catch a glimpse of Jesus walking by. Avoiding the hustle and bustle of the crowds to get a better view. For as Scripture says, Zacchaeus was small of stature. Many modern translations substitute the word short for small... to the detriment of the deeper meaning of the story. For the fact of Zacchaeus' spiritual crisis is hardly revealed by the word short.

The story might be better read this way - Zacchaeus sought to see Jesus but he could not, for the crowd held him in little esteem and he could not hold his head up for shame and so climbing a tree, he sought a place apart so that he might see the Lord.

Zacchaeus is in crisis. He lacks for community, He is an outcast, captive by the choices that he made along the way of accumulating his wealth and status. Zacchaeus has constructed for himself a lofty tower of security and power at the expense of his community. And now he finds it deeply dissatisfying because he is alone and separated from the fellowship of his own people.

And when Jesus says, "come down" I don't suppose he is merely talking about the tree! I believe it is every bit as much about the place of privilege and power and wealth that Zacchaeus has constructed for himself - a place of isolation, and haughtiness, and lack of concern for his fellows who suffer under the rule of an oppressive regime. A place of loneliness.

But, I believe Zacchaeus has already repented too, and wants to amend his life, but can not find a hearing among the crowd. Notice that it doesn't take much but an invitation for him to come down for him to offer to give away half of his wealth and to repay four fold anything he may have defrauded. A call from Jesus has a way of inspiring, yes. But Jesus did not ask anything of Zacchaeus except to stay in his home. Zacchaeus, rather, is given a hearing by Jesus' invitation and offers to

make amends for his past so that he might be a part of the community again.

Can any of us identify with Zacchaeus? Well, it's not too much of a stretch to suggest that many of us, in our own way, can be like him. We live in a society of wealth and privilege. We spend our time consumed with being successful, achieving status. And the longer we are at it, and surprisingly the more successful we are, the more insulated we feel at times. And the more distant we become from the realities of those who have nothing or who have very little. And we slowly become less and less concerned with others and more concerned with holding on to what we have worked so hard for. But, we yearn for community. And havens like Our Savior can often be the very places we find it. And then - along comes Jesus who says "come down from there, for I need to stay at your house."

The story of Zacchaeus is the story of vocation - a subject near and dear to my own heart. Not a call to those who are holy or special or who have some spiritual gift, but a call to those of us who are ordinary, dissatisfied or even sinful.

Once upon a time that seems like a million years ago, I had another life. I was beginning my first career - a very successful one. I was recovering from a painful, manic youth spent mainly on the street with the wrong people, doing the wrong things. I was an avowed punk, anti-authoritarian, with a tendency toward self-hatred and violence and

abuse. It was the eighties, and the pressure for success and status was relentless. And I bought into that way of life with a passion, channeling all of my sense of entitlement and resentment. I worked hard, and played harder, filled my life with lots and of things, and crowds, and self-indulgence. I made a lot of money, treated people very badly, and was miserable. And like our Zacchaeus, I felt small in stature, walked with my head down, and felt dreadfully alone. I earnestly wanted to repent of my selfishness and find a way to amend my life.

When I came back to the church in my mid twenties, I rediscovered a love for God that while present for most of my life, my discomfort with my choices and my selfishness kept me from indulging too deeply. The call of Jesus as embodied in the community of the church inspired me, much like Zacchaeus, to want to give more of myself to God and others in service than was - strictly speaking - required. And so I pondered the Baptismal Covenant, and the hallmarks of what it meant to be a good follower of Jesus. Prayer, worship, service, love, compassion, justice. I knew in my heart that I wanted to do these things, but I had 26 years of experience to prove that - left to my own devices - I wouldn't. I yearned to express this longing among my friends, but those who knew me in those days - knew me too well - and I could not get a hearing among them.

Like many people who explore the idea of vocation in our church, I thought perhaps I wanted to explore holy orders as a priest. Thankfully, I had a priest in my parish who knew about religious life - and

particularly about a little known community “The Brotherhood of Saint Gregory.” I entered the community at the age of 27, the first gen-X member of the community. And my history (and maybe the pink Mohawk and nose ring) caused the brothers to nickname me “the Punk Monk.” A name that has stuck with me even still at the age of 45, even though the punk has mostly - if not entirely - left the building.

The call to Zacchaeus, “come down from there, I want to stay at your house,” is embodied in the Brotherhood of Saint Gregory. Jesus doesn’t say “come and stay at my house.” Jesus wants to stay at mine. At yours.

The Brothers, in response to this call, live their religious vocations fully in the world. Having longed for community, we opt not for an isolated one, but one that expands into our very families, neighborhoods, communities - modeling a religious vocation in the world rather than apart from it. We live a Rule of Life, take vows to serve, love, and obey Christ in the way that we believe all Christians are called by our Baptismal Covenant to live. By serving others.

Like Zacchaeus, the invitation of Jesus has inspired us in religious life to give away not just half but all of our lives in service to the Gospel, and to repay fourfold or even more in gratitude by the turning of our lives towards service on Christ’s behalf to others. And what blessings we have received in turn.

The question this morning is this: Once we have caught a glimpse of Jesus, and heard the words of invitation, how far down will we have to climb to answer it? And like Zacchaeus, in gratitude, what will we be willing to sacrifice to claim our place in the beloved community of God's people? The Baptismal Covenant belongs to all of us as a Rule of Life. I urge you to look it up again when you have a chance on p. 304 of the BCP. For those of you wonder what vows are like, or who have taken vows of some kind, whether in marriage or ordination - see what would happen if you applied the same weight to the Baptismal Covenant that you do to those other vows. See how your life might change.