

The Reverend Jon Hauerwas – November 10, 2019
Who Jesus Was
John 16:21-24 and Luke 19:1-10

We know who Jesus was. A historical figure. The son of Joseph and Mary. Born in the time of Herod. A Jew raised in the tiny village of Nazareth, he sat at the feet of religious authorities and debated with the scholars of his day. Jesus was a Palestinian on the outskirts of the vast and mighty Roman Empire. Baptized by John in the Jordan River, he became an itinerant teacher and preacher. The leader of 12 apostles. He often spoke about the kingdom of God, and employed parables in way that few others ever had.

Jesus was credited with performing miracles. He taught his disciples to forsake the trappings of the material world, to associate with the lowly, and to model forgiveness. He instructed his followers to baptize in the Trinitarian formula and to share Communion as a sign and seal of God's inclusive love. He became known throughout the ancient near east, was followed by large crowds, and was crucified in the holy city of Jerusalem.

At the time of his death, his disciples believed that hope was lost. They fled in fear. And then, something incredible happened. He appeared to them once again.

Having seen him face to face, they became convinced of his resurrection. They began to interpret the scriptures and Jesus' teachings in a new way, and devoted themselves to spreading the good news of his message. Missionaries traveled to the ends of the earth, declaring him the crucified and risen Christ, the messiah of all of the earth. Christians appeared near and far, and billions of adherents would one day call themselves his followers.

Each of those billions of adherents have a unique story about how they came to know him. And today, we learn about Zacchaeus' story. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. The taxes he collected were on behalf of the Empire and returned directly to Rome. This was no democracy and, for average Palestinians, the Romans represented forcible rule and oppression. Zacchaeus, serving as their agent, was akin to a traitor. In their minds, he had enriched himself by cozying up to the enemy, taking from his own people's pockets, and enjoying a life of luxury.

We all know that good politicians like to tell a good story. Oftentimes, the stories that they tell are about sympathetic, hard-working people. They recall meeting a single mother in rural Iowa who works four jobs to make ends meet. In telling that story, they want us to know that they get it. That even though they may draw crowds in the thousands and have reporters hang on their every word, they

haven't forgotten about average people. "I will fight for that single mother," they tell us, "and I will fight for you."

But Jesus was not interested in political calculations. He did not survey the crowd and choose to align himself with the most sympathetic person at the event. No. He often did the opposite. He once stood with a woman accused of committing adultery and said, "whoever is without sin, let him be the one to cast the first stone." And amid a large crowd in our second lesson this morning, Jesus calls out to the least sympathetic person imaginable. Zacchaues. The tax collector. The traitor. The reviled. "Come down" from that tree, he tells him, "for I must dine at your house today."

When people wondered aloud who Jesus was, he didn't respond by seeking popular acclaim. Just imagine how many in the crowds would have grumbled and turned their backs on him in disgust when he called out to Zacchaeus. You can almost hear them shouting, "I thought you came for people like us. But for him? So what they say is true. You eat with prostitutes. You align yourself with tax collectors. Have you no dignity, sir?"

Jesus came not just for the people like us, but for all people. For the people that we would rather not dignify. For those with the wrong values, and those who

support the other candidate. Jesus broke with normal conventions by welcoming sinners, tax collectors, children, and women into his midst. And he did this all in a very visible way for all to see and criticize. And criticize him they did.

Friends, our holy calling is to welcome all who display a sincerity of heart, and to engage in relationship with one another. This won't always be easy, and we won't always get it right. Here, I want to tell you a personal story. When I was serving as an Associate Pastor in Worthington, Ohio, I once led a mission trip to South Africa with a particular focus on issues of HIV and AIDS.

We were sharing a meal with children at an HIV clinic. We had brought all of the supplies. I asked each of the children their names, and then labeled each of our limited, plastic cups, hoping that the children would re-use them throughout the day. This way, we would have enough for everyone. We would also prevent the spread of illnesses, like the common cold.

What I didn't know is that, in Soweto, the children were accustomed to sharing drinking glasses with their friends. And when I wrote the names of each child on those cups, they were offended. Eventually, word got back to me that the children thought that the white visitors were segregating them. That we were

distancing ourselves from them. That we were afraid that we would contract HIV by drinking after them. Unwittingly, I had stepped into the painful waters of an apartheid past without ever intending to do so.

In conversations with others, our words and actions have an impact. Visitors recognize when we are not welcoming and when they leave feeling like outsiders. Sometimes, it is the simple things that make all of the difference. A smile. A handshake. A sincere conversation. The community that forms in this place is looking for friendship, and acceptance, and love. They are looking to us for signs of who Jesus was and who Jesus is.

When I failed so publicly in South Africa, I apologized and asked for their forgiveness. None of us is perfect, but we are daily striving to be better. And it is our hope that, when we get it wrong, as we all will, that others will still see who Jesus was. May it be so and all thanks be to God. Amen.