

Who's in Your Circle of Friends

Luke 19:1-10
October 30, 2022

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson

During its October meeting, Session approved Jon Wilson for church membership, which we will celebrate during worship today through a letter Jon wrote to the congregation. Jon is a prisoner at the Medical Center for Federal Prisoners in Springfield, MO, where he receives our bulletins and sermons each week, has led Bible studies for other inmates, takes a religious studies class, and sends money to this church as a tithe, one tenth of what he makes cleaning the medical rooms at the prison.

Prior to getting in trouble, Jon and his wife, Sarah worshiped with us online via LiveStream, along with his mother, Gwen, and brother David. I officiated the wedding of Jon and Sarah, the wedding of his son, and the funeral of his mother when she passed away about three years ago.

All this is to say that Jon Wilson, like Zacchaeus, is a son of Abraham, a child of God, claimed by Christ as a brother in faith, despite being in prison paying his debt to society. So when Jon asked me if he could join the church, I checked with Session and they said he could. Session then spoke with Jon on a conference call during our meeting, and then welcomed him into membership.

I don't know how you feel about having someone in prison join the church, but it sure seems to track with what Jesus does in today's New Testament lesson, welcoming Zacchaeus into the faith – into the house of God – despite his crime of cheating poor people just to make himself rich and powerful.

Turns out that Jesus welcomes and befriends all kinds of people – rich and poor, powerful and powerless, all races, genders and orientations, all shapes and sizes, skills and abilities. What a friend we have in Jesus. If only we were so open to making new friends, all kinds of new friends.

But the truth is, we're kind of picky about the people we hang out with, the people we're open to meeting and getting to know. There are some people with whom we just don't associate, just don't approach, even here at church. What a missed opportunity.

Whatever reason you have for never having talked with someone here at church, I guarantee you're missing out on getting to know a great person, someone with gifts and talents and a heart for Jesus, someone who would contribute to who you are and add to your appreciation of the world around you.

It all has to do with who you hang out with, and why? Jesus wants to hang out with Zacchaeus, to stay at his house despite the crowd's grumbling, because, says Jesus, "he too is a son of Abraham." No other reason. Just because Zacchaeus is a child of God.

That's a great motivation for us to expand our social circle, to take a moment to connect with the people God brings across our path in life, despite our difference, and maybe even because of our differences.

In his book titled "Just Walk Across the Room," writer Bill Hybel asks, "What if you knew that by simply crossing the room and saying hello to someone, you could change that person's life forever? Just a few steps to make an eternal difference. ... All you need," says Hybel, "is a heart that's in tune with the Holy Spirit and a willingness to venture out of your 'Circle of Comfort' and into another person's life." But we seldom do that. We seldom step out of our comfort zone. It's just too awkward and scary.

Take for instance the guy who decided to try making new friends outside Facebook while applying the same principles. He spent his days walking down the street and telling perfect strangers what he'd eaten, how he was feeling, what he did the night before, and what he was doing tomorrow. He'd show them pictures of his family, his dog, and himself fixing his car. Not only that, he stopped to listen to their conversations, and then he'd flash them a little heart symbol or a thumbs-up. And you know what? It worked. He already has three new people following him – two police officers and a psychiatrist.

Yes, we seldom step out of our comfort zone socially, at least not in person maybe on Facebook. We just don't take the time to visit with someone new. We'd rather catch up with our usual friends. And by doing that, we miss out on seeing the world in a new way. Jesus was all about see the world in a new way, meeting new people, all kinds of people. Jesus didn't let any outside circumstance limit who was in his circle of friends.

Take Zacchaeus for example. Jesus "entered Jericho and was passing through it" when he saw this little man up a tree. "Zacchaeus," says Jesus, "hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." What was so special about Zacchaeus? I mean he wasn't popular like Jesus. In fact the two couldn't have been more different from one another. Zacchaeus was rich and Jesus lived on handouts. Zacchaeus was short and Jesus was tall.

Zacchaeus was a nervous, frantic little man – running ahead of the crowd, climbing a tree – while Jesus walked with purpose and confidence. Zacchaeus had a house; Jesus was a wanderer who slept outdoors. Zacchaeus was a thief and a cheat; Jesus was without sin. So much of who Zacchaeus was and what he faced in life could have kept him from ever meeting Jesus, from ever thinking he could be accepted.

What might be putting distance between you and Jesus, and other people? Money – either too much or not enough – that can keep people apart. People whose lives are going well, they may not feel they need a richer community of faith – no need to expand their social circle. They've got all they need.

Or conversely, if you have no money to spare and barely get by, you might think you have nothing to give, or that you don't fit in. And yet, Jesus is drawn to all kinds of people. Everyone has something to offer, everyone is valued and accepted.

Another barrier might be a person's past. The mistakes we've made, the bad choices we live with – they can make us feel unworthy of a life with Jesus by our side. And yet Jesus says, "... The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." There's always a place here for those who've had a rough life. I mean if you think about it, we are all more similar to Zacchaeus the cheat than we are to Jesus the Lord, right?

No one has any reason to feel ashamed of their past in this or any other church. When you come to Christ, the past is finished and everything is new, as long as you're willing to live into the new life Jesus offers. And we're going to see an example of that type of redemption a little later in service today.

And we see an example of that right here, where Luke tells us that Zacchaeus, when brought into the community of faith, "stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.'"

Meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus knew what he needed to do in order to open his life to all that Jesus offers. What's holding you back? Who might you encounter along the way who, if you stop and take the time, would open your life to a new perspective, and enrich your life as a child of God? Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Beloved Lord Jesus, remind us that the church is your people. It is also a place of prayer and compassion.

Remind us that it is very important to trust in you and return to you in the silence of simplicity and trust.

Instill in us a new spirit and inflame us with a love that burns deep and ignites other hearts with friendship and peace.

Help us to remain aware of your teachings so that we will do justice, walk humbly and live in kindness all our days.

We lift up in prayer our friends and loved ones dealing with injuries, illness and disease. We pray your spirit of comfort and peace upon those in the twilight of life. We pray this in the name and power of Jesus Christ, who came that we might know what a life of perfect love looks like, and who taught us the perfect prayer that we might pray it together now, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,

as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.