



Luke: The Gospel of Amazement

Week 12: Today

Lori Lampert - 09/18/2022

Next week, Ben and I and the bunch of people we call our family are heading to Port Orange, Florida for a whirlwind weekend. We are going to celebrate the 90th birthday of Barbara Lampert, the beloved matriarch of the Lampert clan. She's been my mother-in-law for over 45 years, which, when I stop and think of it, means she was really young when Ben and I married. Didn't think so at the time, of course. Anyone over 40 was ancient back then. Time marches on.

But, as I have been privileged to watch her over the years, I have learned that there are few people in the world who exude as much joy as Barbara Mae Werndli Lampert Shepherd. It did take me a little while to figure out that she wasn't laughing at me, she was just laughing. She wasn't making fun of me, she just wants life to be fun. She knows suffering and difficulty. She has lost her parents, two brothers, a son, and two husbands over those 90 years. She knows challenges, as each of her six children were born in six different cities as Ben's dad relocated the family for his next position.

By the time I met her, I was all of 16 years old. I wondered who was this person who started her Saturday exercising to "Go you chicken fat, go away" on the record player? Who would run the vacuum outside the room I was in when I came to visit from college when I was trying to sleep past

7am? Who would say to Ben and me, “Don't do anything on Saturday that will keep you from church on Sunday?” This is Barbara.

Barbara is one of my living heroes. It took me gaining some wisdom before I began to understand how incredibly strong and brave she is. As a 20 year-old bride, and then a 23 year-old first-time mom, her honest and often unfiltered appraisal of my life was difficult to hear.

I thought you should bathe a baby at night. She thought that it should happen in the morning. Not a big deal but, well, I made it out to be. I thought my entire parenting future rested on bath time. Every one of her 12 grandchildren, and most of her great grandchildren, have been bathed—in the morning—in her kitchen sink, at one time or another. And all of them have sat in her welcoming lap and listened as she read a story with all the exuberance and drama of a major Broadway production.

Barbara lives in the moment. Today. And although I don't know that I have ever sat in her lap, I have leaned up against her many times and sighed. But, more often than not, I have laughed with her. Smiled with her. And as the years have passed I have sought her counsel and wisdom. I sit closely, hoping that some of her generosity and kindness will rub off on me.

Barbara's health challenges are too many to count, and she wouldn't appreciate it if I counted them for you. She begins each day with a text to her five kids. Then she tackles the paper, Wordle, and the crossword puzzle before she gets ready to greet people with full makeup, a lovely outfit, and jewelry that will bring it all together. Show picture. Today she is ready to celebrate life. Today. And next Saturday, we will gather to celebrate her 32,850th today on the planet.

Today. The author of Luke uses this word 'today' 11 times in his gospel. In Luke 4, Jesus begins his ministry in the synagogue proclaiming that today the scripture is fulfilled. When Jesus heals the man who was unable to walk,

the crowd remarks they have seen incredible things today. As he hangs crucified on the cross, Jesus turns to the thief on his right and says “Today you will be with me in paradise.” Today counts. It matters what you will do today.

We have walked with Jesus through the Gospel of Luke for 14 weeks. We have watched and listened as step by step, word by word, he reveals the character of God as he approaches Jerusalem.

God as the God of love who reaches out to the marginalized and brings them in. God as the God of compassion who heals those who suffer in mind, body, and spirit. God as the God of justice as Jesus speaks against oppression and for freedom. Jesus teaches acceptance for the poor, the widowed, the orphan.

Jesus has been clear: there is a cost to discipleship. It will always be a choice that followers of Jesus are invited to make. By the power of the Holy Spirit we can choose to align our lives with Jesus and get busy changing the world.

Maybe you have noticed, but Jesus has been pretty darn direct in the gospel of Luke with a few particular groups of people. With the religious leaders of the day—the scribes and Pharisees. And with the Roman authorities who have occupied this land. And also with the rich, and the tax collectors, who (because they have been in cahoots with the Romans to extort money) are also known to be rich.

Jesus has quoted scripture showing that the rich have already received their consolation, on earth, not in heaven. He’s told parables that make it clear the rich are the ones in the wrong. He told the host of a dinner he went to not to invite the rich, or those doggone tax collectors. Jesus makes it clear that having wealth makes discipleship difficult.

As a matter of fact, in Luke 18, we read of the story of the rich young ruler who hears with great disappointment Jesus' advice: "Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." 23 But when he heard this, he became sad, for he was very rich. 24 Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! 25 Indeed, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."

The passage we are going to look at today is in Luke 19. Jesus is 23 miles from Jerusalem, in Jericho. He will walk those last miles uphill, both geographically and metaphorically, as he steps closer and closer to the cross. Today is another encounter where Jesus—once again—takes what we think we know, what we think we have all figured out, and challenges us.

You may have heard this story sung as a child. But there's so much more going on than a wee little man up a tree. Luke 19:

¹ He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."

⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸ Zacchaeus 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." ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this

house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Let me read a brief synopsis of this passage from theologian Frederick Beuchener:

The story goes like this. The sawed-off shyster is perched in the sycamore tree. Jesus opens his mouth to speak. All Jericho hugs itself in anticipation of hearing him give the man holy hell. "Woe unto you! Repent! Wise up!" is the least of what they expect. What Jesus says is, "Come down on the double. I'm staying at your house." The mob points out that the man Jesus is talking to is a public disaster. Jesus' silence is deafening.

Zacchaeus has thrown all decorum aside to see Jesus. This rich tax collector has run through the streets of Jericho with his robe flapping as he dodged the crowd. He has climbed a tree to catch a glimpse of the man from Galilee. Maybe out of curiosity. Maybe out of desperation. People know him, he's the rich tax collector they have already judged as a sinner and unworthy. He is not one of the crowd. He is not one of them. They have already decided he cannot change. Yet, today the camel does pass through the eye of the needle.

The crowd is stunned. This one too? Even the rich can be saved? Even the one who has hurt them? Stolen from them? Worked in cahoots with the Romans? Even Zacchaeus? A sawed-off shyster, as Buechener describes him? Yes. Even him. Maybe especially him. The one the crowd has said cannot be saved, Jesus has come to save.

Jesus looks up. Zacchaeus comes down. Zacchaeus stands up. Jesus transforms.

Don't you love it? In the middle of a crowd of people, so dense that Zacchaeus has to climb a tree to see him, Jesus looks up. He knows exactly where Zacchaeus is, who he is. The shepherd has found another lost sheep. The woman has found another coin that has rolled away into the darkness. Grace is enacted before the crowd. Jesus knows Zacchaeus' name. Knows everything about him. Knows his yesterday. Jesus has come to change him today. Not tomorrow. Today. Come down now. It's time to start a new life.

Jesus not only looks at him, but then he does something we would think is a little rude in our day and age—he invites himself into Zacchaeus' home. Jesus doesn't just want to meet Zacchaeus, he wants to more fully know him, know where and how he lives, know what it would be like to be in his home, to meet his family—Jesus wants a relationship, not merely an acquaintance. And that's not just for tax collectors. Jesus wants that relationship with everyone. Today.

So Zacchaeus comes down. And with each branch, as he descends from the tree, he comes closer to Jesus. He is leaving his ego in the tree. He is leaving his desire to extort, his need for more riches, his love of coercion, manipulation, his sin, up among the leaves. The crowd is stunned into silence as the rich tax collector brings himself before this itinerant preacher. Now. Now is the time for transformation to happen.

Zacchaeus stands up. Before Jesus. Before the crowd. Before the religious leaders. Before the Romans. Before those he has harmed. Before those who expected to be harmed by him again.

Zacchaeus stands and speaks. He owns his sin. The system he has used to defraud. He is done. The money he has stolen, he will return. The ways in which he has lined his pockets—although technically legal by Roman standards—he will no longer participate in. He is keeping his day job but will do it with integrity. Yes, you can work for the government and follow Jesus. Of course you can. This tax collector on this day finds the joy of

redemption. The pleasure of responding to Jesus. The gift of being included today.

Jesus transforms. This is who Jesus is. This is the Son of God who calls people out of the darkness into the light. This is our Lord and Savior who sees each hair on your head, knows us by name, passionately loves us and invites us into a relationship with him. The one who is never just passing by, lost in a crowd of people, too busy, too occupied by the needs all around him that he does not see you. And me. And also the one we have judged unworthy. The one we have labeled because of their wealth or their occupation. The one we have decided is beyond God's love and forgiveness. There is no such person.

Take just a moment and place yourself in this story. Who are you today? Are you the one like Zacchaeus, who is financially rich but spiritually poor? From the outside have you ensured that it looks like you have it all, but inside you have deep emptiness that needs to be filled?

Are you climbing the tree to catch just a glimpse of Jesus? Are you a part of the crowd, so busy milling around Jesus that you don't realize that there are people around you who are desperate to meet him? Are you grumbling because Jesus is giving way too much attention to sinners and not noticing you? Are you on the fringe of this crowd, watching Jesus transform a life and wanting that for yourself?

Now I ask you, who do you believe Jesus wants you to be today? Jesus saw you yesterday, and the day before that and the day before that. There is no tree high enough, no crowd large enough, no obstacle big enough to keep Jesus from finding you. And when you climb down and stand before him you will see him too. Clearly. Today. How will you respond? How will you respond today?

Will you be willing to lift up the person who cannot see? Will you step aside so others can be brought to him? Could you step back so someone else can step forward? When Jesus calls your name, will you hurry to do what he asks? Even to give away your resources?

Will you allow Jesus to redeem your past mistakes and sins for his purposes? To make wrongs become right? Will you make yourself available to follow Jesus into the world—wherever it may be—so that through you, lives can be transformed? One life at a time, until the world is transformed. Starting today.

This today is so very valuable. This is the day we have been given, and the choices we make today can and will influence our future and the future of those around us. Whether you are in your 90s like dear Barbara, or Shep and Nancy, or Ruth. Whether you are in your 60s like me, or your 30s or your teens. We have today to respond to Jesus. We have today to laugh. We have today to love. We have today to apologize. To forgive. To repair. To be transformed. Get out of the tree and live.