

Title: Welcoming and Softening Bias

Text: Luke 19: 1-10

Rev. Sharon Smith

Life is never straight forward, eh?

It is a rare moment when everything around us aligns with our beliefs, our heart, our values and our faith? Mostly following Christ in our world today feels like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole.

Like:

- you wake up in the morning and the Shema is going through your mind – that wonderful Old Testament Creed to love God, to love your neighbour and to love yourself going – and then that day – your work supervisor picks on you in a staff meeting and hangs you out to dry.
- Or you are moved in your heart to give extra money to a worthy cause, like assisting Afghani refugees, and then you hop in the car filled with that loving glow and drive to the store and you are pulled over by a traffic cop for going 10 km/h over the speed in a school zone. And you are like, really? Why can't I receive generosity when I give generosity?
- Or you finally find peace in a complex relationship and the person is diagnosed with a terminal illness.

In the words of Alanis Morissette: Isn't it Ironic?

Life is messy, provisional, and intrinsically relational. Life is spherical. It is lived in 3D. It is better understood from lived experience than from abstractions.

Our gospel story highlights a lived experience complexity in one man's attempt to live faithfully. The Gospel of Luke's story of a man named Zacchaeus.

We have oversimplified this story, turning it into abstract ideas of repentance and forgiveness. Forming principles from this story - a 'meeting Jesus moment'.

Jesus enters Jericho and a man named Zacchaeus who was a chief tax collector and was rich...

Let's stop the story here. Tax collectors were known in Palestine to be rich by making their fortunes at the expense of their own people by colluding with their imperial bosses.

And "A chief tax collector" more so – as a patronage system it means that Zacchaeus oversaw other tax collectors, who each paid a portion of their collection to him.

This man wanted to meet Jesus. He climbs a tree, he seen by Jesus and then Jesus comes to his home.

And now it gets interesting.

A recent commentary on this passage by David Lose (a Lutheran theologian) highlights the following:

Contrary to most contemporary translations (including the New Revised Standard Version – that we have in our bulletins today), the tense of the verbs in Zacchaeus’ declaration are present, rather than future.

This means Zacchaeus isn’t pledging,
“Look, half of my possessions I will give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

Rather, Zacchaeus is boasting (probably in response to the grumbling of the crowd),
“Look, half of my possessions I give to the poor...[and] I pay back four times” — as in right now, already, as a matter of practice.

Zacchaeus’ life suddenly is way more complicated.

What if Zacchaeus **was a tax collector AND gave his money away generously**?

Our brains don’t have categories for this kind of complexity. It makes us feel uncomfortable.

It says something about the assumptions of the crowd and perhaps our own, and earlier interpreters of the text:

Tax collectors are sinners. Nothing good can come from them.

Yet Jesus shocks the crowds and disciples alike by seeking out this rich tax collector, honoring him, affirming him, naming him a child of God and declaring that, indeed, salvation has come this very day to his household.

To really see a person, to enact this way of Christ’s love we need practices that help us to soften our biases as part of our continuing spiritual evolution.

A bias – is a prejudice without awareness.

We are invited to grow in our awareness.

Our friend, Dr. Jessica Motherwell MacFarlane says:

“We are called to be impeccably faithful to WHAT IS.

To grow a nuanced awareness of the little changes in our emotional reactions, to develop sensitive perception of our emotions.

Our accurate perception of our emotional experience and our taking in the meaning of those embodied rising messages is our truest truth — our holiest moment — our deepest companionship that we can have with the Divine. Our growing emotional literacy actually reduces the opportunities for our brains to go into “autopilot” or use biased precognitive filters”.

Deeply imbedded in the Christian tradition – are practices that enable us to establish a “habit of mind and heart” that preclude cognitive shortcuts.

One such practice is:

- The Welcoming Prayer, a method of consenting to God’s presence and action in our physical and emotional reactions to events and situations in daily life.
- It is a "letting go" in the present moment, in the midst of the activity of ordinary life. It helps to dismantle the emotional programs of the false-self system and to heal the wounds of a lifetime by addressing them where they are stored — in the body.
- Practicing the Welcoming Prayer offers us the opportunity to make choices free of the false-self system — responding instead of reacting to the present moment. Through the action of the Holy Spirit, the practice empowers us to take appropriate action as freely and lovingly as possible in any situation that presents itself.

"To welcome and to let go
is one of the most
radically loving, faith-filled
gestures we can make
in each moment of each day.
It is an open-hearted embrace
of all that is in ourselves
and in the world."

— Mary Mrozowski, creator of the Welcoming Prayer

We stay with the reaction in our bodies, even though we would rather move away from that uncomfortable feeling.

We welcome the feeling and the discomfort, as a way to welcome God, the Ground of our Being.

And we let go. We let go our habitual shortcuts that are formed by our need for control, for affirmation or for security.

Some instructions of the Welcoming Practice are available on the St. Catherine's sermon page.

And in the lobby.

Life is complex and we often find ourselves in contexts that don't neatly integrate.

People don't fit our preconceived notions or ideals.
Living our Creeds is so much harder than saying them.

Richard Wagamese, an Ojibwe Elder wrote in his book Embers:

LIKE MOST OF us do, I spent a lot of time trying to compress things into a context I could accept. That was hard work, and it meant I was alone most of the time. Nowadays, I figure

life is pretty simple: Creator is everywhere and divine light shines through everything and everyone all the time. My work is to look for that light. In those fleeting, glorious instances when I see it, I am made more, right then, right there.

So in the words of the author to the Thessalonians: be steadfast and faithful during your afflictions. Keep on enduring. Amen.

The Blessings of Jesus

Blessed are you when you know your need
for yours is the grace of heaven.
Blessed are you who weep
for your tears will be wiped away.
Blessed are you who are humble
for you are close to the sacred earth.
Blessed are you who hunger for earth's oneness
for you will be satisfied.
Blessed are you forgiving ones
for you are free.
Blessed are you who are clear in heart
for you see the Living Presence.
Blessed are you who are peacemakers
for you are born of God.
Amen

(The Casa del Sol Blessings of Jesus – based on Matthew 5:3-9)

-Excerpt from 'Praying with the Earth: A Prayerbook for Peace' by John Philip Newell