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Sermon transcript St Philip Oak Bay

9.30 am Eucharist, 30 October 2022

Celebrant and preacher: Rev. Canon Peter Parker

Sermon starts: 33:39

Readings: Haggai 1:15B-2:9, Luke 20:27-38

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m6QTsSAxiXY>

I speak to you now in the name of God, creator, redeemer and sustainer. Amen.

Have you ever gone to some great effort to see some celebrity, for example, the Queen, or the Beatles, or some other famous leader, or maybe a winning sports Team? You may have lined up for hours, maybe in the rain or the hot sun, standing until your feet hurt, and finally the procession goes by. And afterwards, after the parade has gone by, what then? Perhaps you went home to sweep the garage or wash the car. Perhaps you went to the pub or to the coffee shop to sit around and say, “Wasn't it great! I wonder if they'll win next year.” A few weeks later, it’s little more than a fun memory.

In my first year at UVic there was a girl in my biology class who caught my eye: she had long hair, big eyes, tall and graceful. As the weeks went by, more and more I really wanted to get to know her. I found out her name was Melanie, but I had no idea what she was really like. When you're young, of course, you begin to imagine how wonderful that person must be, and the more you imagine, the more you want to get to know them. I found myself going to greater and greater efforts to meet her, positioning myself at the exit door of the lecture hall so that we would bump into each other. I finally got my courage up and asked her if she would like to go to a show on the weekend. To my astonishment, she smiled and said, “Yes, that’d be lovely.” Then I had to find some money, arrange to borrow my father's car, find out what movie we wanted to go to and where she lived, etc. I was willing to go to great efforts to find out who she was. So I took her on this date…

Okay - because I know you will all ask if I don't tell you, it turned out that, although she was perfectly nice enough, we actually had little in common, and all my anticipation about wonderful chemistry and how charming and magical she would be were quite disappointed. And to be honest, I can't remember a single thing about Melanie except her name. But I sure went to a lot of effort to find out who she was.

Well, Zacchaeus went to a lot of effort to find out who Jesus was. Luke's gospel is very clear: he wanted to see who Jesus was. He wanted to know who this itinerant preacher and healer really was. Now, Jesus was a master at interpreting the signs of what he could see before him. When he saw this little fellow on the road up ahead, already up a tree and waiting for him and the disciples to pass by, Jesus knew instantly that Zacchaeus wanted not only to see but to be seen. He wanted to be seen so that perhaps he could meet Jesus.

I'm sure by the time I asked Melanie out, it was probably painfully obvious to her that I wanted to get to know her. I wanted her to notice me. I was already up that tree, and I was so anxious for her to invite me down. To his credit, Zacchaeus was looking for far more than a charming date - he perhaps didn't know it at the time, but he was looking for something in his life that would be more exciting and more satisfying than what he was doing. He obviously had no friends, no community around him.

Something that is universal at a parade is that short people are allowed to go in front, but the people of Israel who were there have no interest in letting Zacchaeus in. He couldn't get through the crowd because they were shunning him like the tax collector we heard about last week. Zacchaeus was a collaborator with the Romans. He was apparently corrupt as well, keeping as much tax money for himself as he could get away with. Little wonder he had no friends. He was looking for something else in his life. Then, wonder of wonders, Jesus notices him, and calls him down, and says, “Zacchaeus, I'll stay at your house tonight.”

Zacchaeus had a date, but look what happens when the date you're looking for is the Son of God. It changed Zacchaeus's life. He decides on the spot that he will make amends for all his corruption and start tithing his wealth for the poor. The sense that you are wronging your brothers and sisters is awakened the moment you discover Jesus is one of them, and when you find out you've been hurting Jesus, it becomes intolerable to continue. You cannot be in the presence of Jesus Christ and not be changed. It takes two things: first, we have to really desire to know who Jesus is. We must want to get to know him better. There's a world of difference between wanting to be merely a spectator of the great saviour as he passes by on the road and wanting to know who Jesus is.

I suspect sometimes we would rather not get to know Jesus too well - keep him over there in the centre of the road in the open convertible. Wave. We'll take some pictures, and then we'll go for coffee afterwards, and say, wasn’t it great. Maybe we’ll turn out for the parade next week. But if we really want to find out who Jesus is, we'll make that extra effort, climbing above whatever is in our way.That's the second thing we need: we need to make some real effort and commitment to get to know Jesus.

So what are the obstacles in our life, the things that loom above us, that keep us from seeing and getting to know Jesus? The enemies are getting to know Jesus are many, and usually more subtle than we think. Sometimes we think time is the problem: “I don't have time to sit for an hour, or even half an hour, to be quietly with Jesus, reading scripture or some other spiritual writing. I don't have time to volunteer in some of the community mission work that's where Jesus is already working.” The time is not the enemy: it is the illusion, the lie, that we would be wasting time and putting ourselves behind in some schedule that we have allowed to dominate us.

Another obstacle we find in getting in our way in our connections with Jesus is our connections with people who aren't the least interested in going to the parade, let alone climbing a tree to see Jesus. They might be work colleagues, social friends, even members of our own families. Jesus is far from their agendas, and yet these people are important to us. And so we let their choices dominate our choices. How many times have I heard, “Well, we won't be there next Sunday because my son and daughter-in-law are visiting.” Well, tell your son and daughter-in-law that there's somewhere you have to be on Sunday morning; they can get their own breakfast if they don't want to come.

Another tool the enemy uses is fear or anxiety: we indulge in a religious reticence, a holy shyness that says, “Oh, I wouldn't want him to actually come and stay with me. I might have to change some things, and that would be too much.” That would be absolutely true, for we would find out that you cannot be in the presence of Jesus Christ and not be changed, and yet we're still afraid of change.

Sometimes we churches are victims of these anxieties. The Jesus we want people to know is the Jesus who would get everyone to support the church and its services as we know them, keeping things the way they've always been. The Jesus we want people to know here in this parish is that Jesus who will lead us back to the way things were before Covid, maybe before Christopher retired… but the Jesus that day turned Zacchaeus's heart outward in an instant, propelling him into a new future that he could scarcely imagine. He even announced publicly, on the spot, the huge financial impact of how he was being changed,

I suspect the Jesus who wants to come and dine with us at this table is offering us a new future that we can scarcely imagine. There's a parade every day. Jesus is in this world, on our same road, coming right by us, all the time. Don’t we want to know who he is, what he’s doing? Don't we want to climb above the forces that prevent us so that the Lord can see us in our eager desire, and says to us, “Come down, friend, for I will stay with you today.” And he will, and like it or not, we will be transformed, turned outward from whatever inward looking habits and defenses we've built over the years, to look outward to the needs of others in the world around us. Even now, Jesus is saying, “I will stay with you today.”

Amen.