



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Pentecost 21
Proper 26 (C)**

By Faith

[RCL] Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 119:137-144; Luke 19:1-10; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

Trouble and distress have come upon me, yet your commandments are my delight. The righteousness of your decrees is everlasting; grant me understanding, that I may live. Amen.

Today's scripture lessons present a unified whole, in lovely, surprising connections.

The prophet Habakkuk is notable because he questions God. He asks, "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help and you will not listen?" and then he announces that he will wait for God's answer. And indeed, God does answer him, saying, "There is still a vision for the appointed time...it will surely come...the righteous live by their faith." The message in Habakkuk is clear: even though destruction and violence are all around, the time will surely come; wait for it; live by faith.

In the psalm appointed for the day, the psalmist tells us that he has been consumed by indignation because his enemies forget God's commandments, yet in spite of his distress, God's commandments are a delight.

Both the prophet and the psalmist are transformed from questioning and indignation to faith and delight in God's law, in the certainty that God's justice is everlasting and the time awaited – the time of salvation – will surely come.

Paul gives thanks for the people of the church in Thessalonica, because he sees their faith growing abundantly, and their love for one another increasing, even during a time of persecution and affliction. Clearly then, we see a theme of holding a steadfast and joyful faith while the world around us is violent and unjust.

Let's look at the transformation in the story of Zacchaeus. At first glance, we have a perfect narrative of making a new beginning in Christ. The story of the man who is short in stature and climbs a tree so that he can see Jesus is appealing to children and other vertically challenged people, and sheds a new light on the line in the psalm "I am small and of little account, yet I do not forget your commandments" (v. 141).

Perhaps Zacchaeus is not only short in stature, but also in moral status among his neighbors. He is a tax collector, and not just any tax collector, but a *chief* tax collector and *rich*. Tax collectors were hated in the community because they collected taxes from their Jewish neighbors for the Romans who occupied their country. In addition, a tax collector could and often did, overcharge their neighbors and keep the extra for themselves. Not only did they serve the Romans, but they also took advantage of their position to steal from their neighbors. The assumption is that Zacchaeus had become rich by his greed and dishonesty, stealing from his community.

So even though Zacchaeus has difficulty seeing Jesus, he makes an effort, humbles himself by doing an undignified, childish thing – climbing a tree – because of his desire to change and become worthy. He welcomes Jesus into his heart and his house, gladly offers to give half of his possessions to the poor, and make restitution if he has taken any money dishonestly. Zacchaeus makes the proper response to his encounter with Jesus.

Our translation states that Zacchaeus was happy to welcome Jesus, but the King James Version says that Zacchaeus received him joyfully. Joy is the appropriate response to God's invitation. He becomes generous, a rich man who is willing to give away his money. Zacchaeus is transformed from sinner to faithful follower of Jesus. He is saved, and, in the words of Paul, Jesus is glorified in him and Zacchaeus in Jesus. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to meet his death, but in the transformation of Zacchaeus, his mission on earth is fulfilled.

Now, Christ's mission was to save not just individual souls but humankind. Christianity is a corporate faith. How did Zacchaeus' transformation affect the community? Zacchaeus was disliked, unpopular, rejected by the community. The crowd grumbles when Jesus reaches out to him, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Let's think about this.

There are two ways of reading verse 8. The original Greek verb might indicate an action that is present and ongoing or a future action. Our translation reads "Half of my possessions I *will* give to the poor." Looking again at the King James Version, the verse reads, "And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold."

Scholars dispute whether Zacchaeus is planning to give his money away in the future, or whether he is actually stating something that he has already done. Perhaps this is the reason that Jesus recognizes Zacchaeus up there in the tree, and calls him down, and invites himself to stay in this man's house.

We know that Zacchaeus is despised by his community. He is an outsider, labeled as a chief tax collector, a rich man, a sinner. He is short in stature. He is not seen by his community until he climbs a tree and is seen by Jesus. Maybe Zacchaeus had been quietly giving to the poor all along! Who among us, that we have left on the margins, that we have not seen clearly because of our assumptions, might surprise us with their generosity and faith?

While we, and perhaps the crowd in Jericho, might be inclined to feel that Zacchaeus is saved because he willingly gives his riches to the poor, what does Jesus actually say? “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.” Jesus says Zacchaeus and all his household are saved simply by being the people of God’s covenant with Abraham. Zacchaeus is saved because of his faith, not because of his works. This is the nature of salvation. It is not based on works, but on faith. Perhaps Zacchaeus’ good works are a result of his faith, of his delight in following God’s commandments.

Let’s look again at the words of the prophet Habakkuk: the righteous live by their faith.

Backing up just a bit, Habakkuk says: “Look at the proud! Their spirit is not right in them, but the righteous live by their faith.” Who is proud in this story? Zacchaeus or the crowd? Who is transformed? Zacchaeus or the crowd?

Both ways of reading the story of Zacchaeus are instructive. We might look at Zacchaeus as an individual sinner, who has repented and been granted salvation. Indeed, it is righteous and good to be transformed by an encounter with Jesus. It is righteous and good to respond with joy to the good news of Christ by giving generously to the poor.

And, as corporate Christians, members of the household of God, we need to consider the possibility that we must recognize ourselves in the crowd. Just as certainly, it is righteous and good to look around us and be open to surprise at who among us may be living with faith and generosity of spirit. “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” And the unseen, the overlooked, the misunderstood folks on the edges of our community, the ones who need to climb a tree in order to be seen.

Let us pray. Gracious God, grant that we may see and be seen by our savior and brother Christ. Grant that we may respond with joy to the good news, that we may be generous not only with our wallets but with our hearts. Grant us freedom from making assumptions about others. Grant that we may see our neighbors as Christ sees them, and open our hearts to the faith and generosity of those we may not like or trust. Gracious God, grant me understanding, that I may live. Amen.

*This sermon was written by **Susan Butterworth** for Proper 26 (C) in 2016.*