

Zacchaeus, the Kingdom of God and Voting;

Dale Ramerman, October 30, 2016; Luke 19:1-10; Proper 26 Yr 3

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight oh Lord our strength and Redeemer.

The theme of our Diocesan Convention was the Kingdom of God. In about 10 days votes in our national election will be counted. I hope to show in this homily a connection between the Convention theme, our reading about Zacchaeus, and our election responsibilities.¹

We are near the end of Church liturgical year C (or 3) in which we have focused on the Gospel of Luke. Three of the remarkable features of Luke are an emphasis on the important role of women; concern for economic justice or, to say it another way, the faithful stewardship of goods; and the coming Kingdom of God.

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
and a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
for his Lord he wanted to see.

A catchy Sunday school song (with a small revision). But there is more to the story.

Zacchaeus' fellow Jews viewed him as a sinner, a traitor who collect taxes on behalf of Rome and was assumed to line his own pockets as well. Thus, his contemporaries expressed shock when Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus to dine at his home.

Listen again to our Gospel reading.

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus. Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost." (CEB)

¹ This homily discusses the intersection of faith (or right belief/commitment to follow Jesus), ethics (or how we live our life, in the context of making decisions in a political election. Though I've pondered the relationship of faith (right belief or following Jesus) and our ethical lives, my thoughts are always tentative. This is apparent in my interpretation of the story of Zacchaeus. If you have thoughts or questions about my homily or the issues I try to raise, I'll be at a table in the Parish Hall, with some copies of The homily. I'd very much like to talk.

Jesus says nothing about Zacchaeus' faith or beliefs. Rather, in response to Zacchaeus' generosity toward the poor and eagerness to pay restitution to anyone he has wronged, a generosity that far exceeded the requirements of the Law, Jesus says that salvation has come to his house.

Faith, for the writer of the Gospel of Luke, is emphatically ethical, always concerned with how belief is lived out in day to day life. Salvation turns on whether one lives out one's beliefs. Recall, for example, the rich young ruler who assured Jesus that he had kept all of the commandments, but Jesus told him there was one more thing he must do to gain eternal life: sell all that he had and give the proceeds to the poor.

Jesus' emphasis on ethical behavior is consistent with the Song of Mary, the prayer Mary expressed before Jesus' birth. That prayer includes these lines:

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things
and the rich he has sent away empty.

Our calling as followers of Jesus is to work for the Kingdom of God by lifting up the lowly, feeding the hungry, welcoming the stranger. To live out these values, we can make no distinction between peoples based on race, gender or social class.

What Jesus saw in the tax collector, was a person who went far beyond the requirements of the prevailing interpretation of the law, a person who worked for the Kingdom of God.

How is this relevant to voting?

First, we have a duty as citizens to vote. Our form of government is grounded in the participation of all citizens in the election of governing officials. Moreover, we have a duty to vote intelligently. Excusing ourselves from voting by saying "both candidates are equally bad" just does not cut it. The right to vote does not come with a pass when the choice is difficult, and no two candidates are ever equal.

We also have a moral obligation to vote, in my view, arising from not only from the privilege of citizenship, but because of the history of citizens who died trying to secure the right to vote for all citizens. These martyrs for the cause of equal rights include **Jimmy Lee Jackson**, an army veteran shot by a police officer as he knelt over his mother who had been knocked to the ground in front of their church where they had just attended a civil rights meeting. **Jenette Hampton Morgan**, a young white woman in Selma, Alabama, who wrote letter after letter for publication advocating equal rights for all and publicly spoke against indignities directed at black people as she observed them happen. During her years of letter writing and speaking out, she was continually harassed, humiliated and threatened, until she took her own life.

Jonathan Daniels, an Episcopal Seminarian, killed in Selma during a civil rights demonstration, when he purposely stepped in front of a young black woman to shield her from a white man aiming his shotgun at her. ***Vernon Dahmer*** a black businessman with three sons in the army in Viet Nam, burned to death by Klansmen after Dahmer, on the radio, said he would pay the poll tax for any black citizens who wanted to vote. ***James Reeb***, a pastor, clubbed to death in Selma during a civil rights demonstration. These men and women, black and white, sacrificed their lives to secure the right to vote for all citizens, regardless of race. How could we dishonor them by not voting?

When we vote, what should we look for when evaluating candidates? As followers of Christ, our lives, including voting decisions, are governed by the teachings and life of Jesus. They are the values we see reflected in the Good News of Christ, the values for which Jesus advocated, the values of the Kingdom of God: food for the hungry; welcome and support for the alien; healing for those sick in body or mind; shelter for the homeless; dignity and hope for the downtrodden; generosity; respect and equality for all regardless of race, gender or class, and careful stewardship. We must also look at other factors such as experience, demeanor and leadership ability; ability to listen, express views, and change one's mind. But the bottom line for me is the candidate's values as expressed in their life.

Are some of these values more important than others? We will have to set priorities.

Some of these values for me, based on my understanding of Jesus' teaching, are not negotiable: unstinting opposition to racism, sexism, classism, which are theological heresy and sin; elimination of poverty and its consequences; and welcoming the stranger, or in our vocabulary, the alien, the undocumented people in our midst. These are some of the lost that Jesus came to save.

But while some values have a higher priority, I don't think single-issue voting is a responsible way to decide for whom to vote.

Basing your vote on a single issue, no matter how important to you, is a shallow way to make a difficult decision. A retired president of a conservative theological seminary, recently said that while he was adamantly pro-life (meaning anti-abortion) he has on occasion voted for candidates who are pro choice, meaning they support a woman's right to make her own reproductive decisions. He did this because after looking at the candidates' positions on all of the important issues and their other qualifications, the pro-choice candidate was overall more in accord with his values and priorities. He added that he sees a strategic advantage for voting for a candidate who supports something you strongly oppose. If elected you may say to that official, I disagree strongly with your position on XYZ, but voted for you because I thought you were the better candidate. Now, on issue QRS I'd like you to consider...

Relying on the values Jesus preached, the values of the Kingdom of God, we can make sound voting decisions. And sometimes we will have to choose a candidate with which we disagree on what to us is an important issue, because in the balance that is the better candidate.

I think Zacchaeus knew his life presented hard choices. In choosing a profession of oversight in the much despised Roman tax system, he engaged in what anyone would call excessive generosity, by giving half of his wealth to the poor and paying back four-fold anyone he learned he had cheated. We would call that living out your faith.

Jesus was someone Zacchaeus had no doubt heard much about, since Jesus regularly passed through Jericho when traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem. When Zacchaeus climbed that tree to see Jesus, and then extended the hospitality of his home to Jesus in the face of the criticism of his fellow citizens, Zacchaeus acknowledged that Jesus was his Lord. And Jesus called him a son of Abraham.

Amen

Christ Episcopal Church, Anacortes

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