

To be Persistent

A Sermon by the Rev. Philip Major on Luke 19:1-10 and Habakkuk 1 & 2
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O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!" and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Then the Lord answered me and said: write the vision, if it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay.

God's kingdom will come. It will not delay, yet we will wait for it. For Habakkuk's people, the wait was not short. Habakkuk delivered these words to the people of Judah as their land was being overrun by the invading Chaldean army. After the siege of Jerusalem and the destruction of the Temple, they waited for the day when they would rebuild their city and the Temple. They had to wait for at least fifty years.

It seems you and I might be in a similar sort of situation. The United States has experienced times of terrible violence in the past. Yet in recent years we are seeing some kinds and levels of violence many of us have never seen in our lifetimes. The wicked surround the righteous, therefore judgment becomes perverted.

During this time God is calling us to be persistent. We are persistent because we understand our work is ultimately God's work. It is not our task to complete the work of the kingdom. It is our task to be persistent.

Consider that it is different to be persistent than to be patient. Patience is the capacity to accept or tolerate delay or suffering without being angry or upset. God is not calling us to accept violent attacks on our leaders. God is not calling us to tolerate the bloodshed our children experience in their schools and neighborhoods. God is calling us to be persistent. God is calling us to be persistent in following Jesus' teaching and example.

In 2022 we have been reading the Gospel of Luke, so we have been immersed in powerful teachings and examples of Jesus. Luke is filled to the brim with episodes that shape us as disciples: Mary's conversation with the Angel Gabriel, the good Samaritan, the rich farmer, choosing a place of humility at the banquet table, and the prodigal son. These stories and teachings are found only in the Gospel of Luke.

The story of Zacchaeus is yet another story found only in the Gospel of Luke. Here we find clear guidance for those who would persist in following God's way. I hope you won't mind hearing it one more time, with a few comments from me.

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. Let's notice that Jericho is just a few miles from Jerusalem. Jesus does not intend to stay the night but will move through the city to his destination, which is Jerusalem. There he will enter to the shouts of the crowds on the back of a colt.

A man was there named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and he was rich. Through many stories and parables in the Gospel of Luke, those who are rich are not in their normal positions of privilege, but must take extra care to not be attached to their riches if they hope to follow Jesus.

Tax collectors were reviled by the people of Judah. They were considered to be traitors. Though they were usually Jews, they collaborated with the Roman occupiers to extract tax payments from the people. Most of the Jews were poor, yet they still had to pay taxes and tolls, which were collected by the tax collectors. The tax collectors earned their income by adding extra charges to each tax payment. They forced people to pay the taxes and the extra charges by threatening to have them arrested, so poor people were forced to pay taxes instead of buying food for their families.

To understand the way people felt about Zacchaeus, consider the way business owners feel about gang leaders or mafia bosses who force them to pay protection money. If the shop owners refuse to pay the gang or the mafia, their shop will be vandalized or set on fire. Zacchaeus was not just an outsider. Zacchaeus was one of the really bad guys.

Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. So he ran ahead. As with the rest of this passage, there is great urgency and forward movement in Zacchaeus' actions. He ran ahead. This was quite undignified for a grown man at this time. Then Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because Jesus was going to pass that way. Zacchaeus is urgently seeking to see Jesus. He left his dignity behind when he climbed into the tree.

This story has the same structure as the miracle stories in Luke and Matthew. The only difference is that Zacchaeus is not a person with leprosy, or blindness, or another physical disability. A different sort of miracle takes place. 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." This is the miracle. Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus; he was desperate to see him. It turns out the Jesus was also seeking Zacchaeus.

So Zacchaeus hurried down, rejoicing to welcome him. Your text says Zacchaeus 'was happy to welcome him.' This is not a good translation and gives the wrong impression. Zacchaeus was not merely happy or glad. Zacchaeus was filled with joy to welcome Jesus.

All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a notorious sinner." Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

God is calling us to be persistent in following Jesus' way of love. The story of Zacchaeus gives us a vivid illustration of what this looks like.

First, there is urgency. We see that following Jesus is an active way of life. I try to make sure that I take enough time to rest, and I encourage you to do the same. But there is also some work to be done. The urgency could be the urgency of taking time to have a real conversation with your neighbor or a friend or a member of your family. It could be the urgency of making a commitment to get some sort of job done right.

Second, we see that Jesus' invitation is equal and valid for every single one of us. Jesus calls the most notorious sinner, the tax collector, the one who got rich at the expense of others, the one who collaborated with the Romans, to follow the way of love. Jesus calls each one of us as well. No one, not even the criminal, is excluded from Jesus' invitation, and no one is more privileged than another when it comes to following Jesus.

Third, like Zacchaeus, we have to keep our eyes open to the opportunities that happen in the course of each day. Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was. We also, need to be keeping our eyes open, in order to see the opportunities for creating and strengthening relationships in our lives. Being persistent as a disciple means looking for opportunities and then taking opportunities to reach out.

For those following the path of love, there is one reliable indicator. We find it here in the juxtaposition of verses six and seven. Zacchaeus hurried down from the tree, rejoicing to welcome Jesus into his home. All who saw it began to grumble. When we are following Jesus we will come to many situations where we end up rejoicing. When we are grumbling, we are not following Jesus. So I urge you to be intentional about the way you are spending your time. If you find yourself in a situation, or if you are listening to people that lead you to feel like grumbling, I encourage you to do something different. Engage in conversations and work that bring joy to your life. God intends for you to be rejoicing, like Zacchaeus.

As we follow Jesus there are little miracles that can be part of every one of our days. Zacchaeus and Jesus had a conversation. Through the conversation someone's life was made whole, honor was brought to life, and Zacchaeus experienced salvation, which means he experienced a turning, or returning, to God. The same is true for us. Little miracles can be part of our days. We engage in conversations and through them our lives are made whole, honor is brought to life, and we turn back toward the one who made us in the image of love.

Finally, let's remember these words from our opening hymn: "For us he prayed, for us he taught, by words and signs and actions thus, still seeking not himself, but us." This is the foundation for everything else in our lives. We are seeking God. And God is seeking us. God is seeking after you. We desire to be close to God. This is why we are here today. And God desires to be close to us.

So in our time of great challenges and uncertainty, remember that God's kingdom will come. It is not our task to finish the job of building the kingdom. That is God's work. Our task is to be persistent in following the way of love. It is the way that is open to each person. It is the way of engagement and taking the opportunities we find each day. It is the way of making space for little miracles to happen. It is the way of rejoicing.