

Message Delivered at Christ Church
October 17th & 18th, 2009
TEXT: Luke 19:1-10
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

Before the message, Keith Tan sang these verses of “Amazing Grace...”

*Amazing Grace, how sweet the sound;
That saved a wretch like me;
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind but now I see.*

*’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear;
And grace my fears revealed;
How precious did that grace appear;
The hour I first believed.*

For a moment, I want you to find a memory to linger in. I was listening to a speaker this week who was talking about hope. And he said something like “hope is memory in reverse,” and that the way we cultivate hope is to remember...to remember the moments of grace; to remember the times when God has set us free.

So I’m going to talk for a bit, but really I invite you to linger in a memory of a time when someone revealed to you God’s grace. When you were given a second chance, or a third chance, or a 100th chance. When Salvation entered your house. When someone peered into your soul; and saw that it was good; and let you off the hook; and brought you in. You know that great moment at the beginning of Les Miserables, when the bishop gives Jean Valjean the candlesticks? It’s one of the greatest moments of grace in all of literature.

Well, we’ve all had our Jean Valjean moments of grace, so see if you can remember yours. Funny thing about being clergy is that we need a lot of grace, because we make lots of mistakes. But that was true when I was a teacher, as well. You know, I taught school before being ordained, and still I am amazed at how forgiving my students were around my inadequacies...

So think about it for a moment. Remember yours...when someone set you free; and new life was revealed; and you could breathe again; when the oppression of the past was lifted; when the deep and fearful pain of separation and exclusion and of lostness, even, was removed not by your own strength and power but by someone else; that moment when the grace of God wasn’t something abstract talked about by a preacher, but was real, and revealed the new life Jesus intends for us.

Linger for a moment upon that memory—that vision—because we’ve all been there: clergy and teachers, but insurance brokers, and bankers, and social workers, and students, and cooks, and stay-at-home parents, as well.

And tax-collectors.

For us, there really is no equivalent to the Hebrew tax-collector. The problem wasn’t just that they were greedy. After all, greed is a common enough occurrence. The problem was that they worked for an oppressor who was never going to leave. They were traitors and bullies who made a living by extorting the weak, protected by the bullies who hired them. They made a buck

by taking as much as they could from people too weak to fight back. And the money they raised was used to keep the foot of the Roman government on the neck of their own people.

They had turned on their own people...not because they believed in Rome, but because they believed in nothing more than their own material well-being. If it is pitiful to sacrifice our character on the altar of our own avarice, then the tax-collector was a most pitiful character, indeed.

The Hebrew people hated the tax-collectors; and despised them; and held them in contempt. Tax-collectors were unclean; they broke the Torah; they were unwelcome among the faithful and unwelcome among anyone who was respectable. A good rabbi, or priest, or Jew of any sort would, if given the chance, admonish a Zacchaeus to repent and change their ways, or else. Can't blame 'em. If we were in their shoes, we probably would, as well.

But what Jesus says to tax-collectors is this: "Come on down. I'm having dinner at your house tonight."

There is this fundamental yearning we all have to hear from the one who matters that basically, we're okay, with no "buts." We want to hear it from our parents...even when we're adults. We want to hear it from our bosses; we want to hear it from our teachers. None of us, probably, expects to hear anyone say that everything we *do* is okay, because we know that it's not. Zacchaeus certainly knew it. But there's a difference between what we do and who we are—a difference between our actions and our being—so we know our mistakes...and that we make lots of them...but we still yearn for the one who matters to say "*you're* okay."

Because we know our own hearts, at least partly. We know that most of the time we do our best. Most people I know do the best they can, or at least try to do the best they can. We recognize that every time we say about a third party, "once you get to know him, he's a really good guy." Deep down, in other words, he's okay. If you just knew him like I knew him...

Well, here's a crazy thing about the Kingdom of God...Jesus knows us; and deep down the squirrely, conniving, and traitorous Zacchaeus is a good guy. He needs to do things differently. He needs to choose a different path. He needs to change his life. He's not walking the godly path. And I think he knew all that or else he wouldn't have climbed a tree. But all that stuff is the second chapter of the book. The first chapter is that while others look at him and see a scoundrel, Jesus looks at him and sees another child of God.

And as a friend of mine said about why this story matters so much—why we love it so much...if Jesus can be this way towards Zacchaeus, then he probably is this way towards me, too. And towards you. Because we want it as bad as Zacchaeus did.

It's an awesome thing when the grace of God barges into our lives. We are released from the performance principle—the "earn it" way of life--and become receivers. We get our breath back. It removes the weight off our backs. Our worries, maybe even our fears, get released. The sun shines, and all of a sudden the universe is friendly. New things become possible. If you've spent some time with your memory, you've been reminded of what it's like.

It got me to thinking about that great hymn of grace we sing here a lot, which was born of John Newton's experience of grace. Newtown was a slave trader, and a storm hit his ship. He was saved, and responded by amending his life. So I was ruminating some...have you ever thought about how odd it is to use the word "amazing" in a hymn? When you think about it, "amazing" is just not a very "hymn-ish" kind of word. Doesn't sound very churchy; doesn't sound very sophisticated. It's rather earthy and colloquial and startling, when you really stop to think about it. And I was wracking my brains trying to think of a hymn written before "Amazing Grace" that had the word "amazing" in it. And I couldn't think of one. I guess because that's

how powerful the experience of grace is...Newton needed to use a word that hymn-writers normally don't use because grace...it's just amazing!

But it's a good word to use. "Amazing" originally meant befuddling or confusing...literally, "in a maze." Which makes it an even **better** word to describe the effect of God's grace. Because sometimes, what the deepest love does is knock us senseless and leave us disoriented and we end up doing the craziest things. "Love is like madness," the Greeks said. "Drunk on love." "Crazy Love." Jesus opens up to Zacchaeus, and then Zacchaeus turns around and in a "crazy love" sort of way is opened up in a way he never would have imagined. "I'm giving it back, Lord." The greedy traitor's life is changed, and so he makes amends and opens up. Too often I think we believe repentance comes before grace. Actually, grace is always what happens first. That's why it's good to remember it. It barges into his life, and Zaccacheus is transformed from Mr. Potter in "It's a Wonderful Life" to Ebenezer Scrooge on Christmas Day. Who'd a thunk it...

But that's what the Kingdom of God does. That's Kingdom life. It doesn't leave us the same. It opens us up, and makes us free, and turns us into lovers of others. We're set free from evil and hatred, and released for good and love...not because of anything we've done on our own, but because of what we have received from a good Lord who calls us out of the tree and invites himself to dinner.

Goodness, it's a beautiful thing. Utterly amazing. And if you haven't listened to a thing I've said these few minutes because you've been taken back to your own Zacchaeus moment, that's okay. It's good to dwell in those memories. Every time we remember what God has done for us in the past, our hope for what God will do in the future is strengthened.

Now next week, we'll be asking one another to make our financial pledge to support the work we want to do together next year, and I want to talk about that a little bit because it's important.

We'll all be receiving a brochure that talks about some important things we want to work for 2010, but they can broadly be broken into three categories.

First, we believe it absolutely essential to maintain our level of giving to the ministries of outreach and mission we participate in. And really, we want to increase it. In the past we've dedicated 10% for outreach and missions. We want to do more next year...because there are still a lot of hurting people; there are still a lot of people for whom the economy has not turned around, and there are still a lot of people who need folks of good will to help whether the economy turns around or not. That's just the way the world is. But we're Kingdom people, and as God's Kingdom people we've got a joyful responsibility to live generously; and we want to live into that calling more fully next year than we have in the past.

Secondly, we believe it absolutely essential to increase our support in the Diocese of Virginia. The people of the Diocese of Virginia are our mother, and we honor our mother. We have a role to fulfill in the life of this diocese, and it is time to live into it. And when we make our offering to the Diocese, what we're really doing is helping the people who helped us. Those funds are used to help new churches get started, and to help congregations that aren't as well off as we are. Here's an example...we have two youth ministers on staff because we know what effective youth ministry does for young people today, who will be adults tomorrow. Most Episcopal churches can't even afford to have one. Instead, they participate in the youth ministry work done by the Diocese which we support. You see, when we support the Diocese of Virginia we're helping other people have as rich a common life as we have been given.

Thirdly, we want to provide all the financial support necessary to do the things we believe God is calling us to do next year. You ought to know something about how things work in this congregation...almost everything we do is because someone who is part of this “we” thought it important that we do it. Every once in a while the staff has a good idea that excites us. But almost every good idea...from a preschool; to Nathan Dungan; to missions; to a memorial garden; to a labyrinth in the new milling area; to CARITAS; to Emmaus Groups and DOCC; to youth small groups; and on and on...almost every good idea that we have and do comes from us. And we just want to make sure we have the resources to do what we believe is important. Not what I believe is important; or the staff; but what we believe is important. And there’s a long list of these things in the brochure you’ll be getting in the mail this week.

So we’re asking one another to commit next week, and to stretch, and to be generous, because this is a good work to which the Lord has called us. It’s a good and important thing to make a commitment. And it’s a good and important thing to support our work. It’s what people in the Church do.

But we heard this story about Zacchaeus today—and we lingered in some moments of grace today—just to be reminded of Jesus’ saving love. The lost are found...lost souls; lost childhoods; lost relationships; lost opportunities...all are redeemed and reclaimed because in God’s amazing grace, and incomprehensible love, that it all begins. Salvation is in the house. The grace of God shows up at dinner. We’re invited into the Kingdom, and receive our home in eternity...an eternity that isn’t just then, but is also now. Right now. In those memories, but right now, too. So that like Zacchaeus, for a moment we open up, and release, and uncurl our fingers and loosen our fists, and somehow and someway—here in our life, but in all parts of our lives—maybe mimic the generosity in our own lives that Jesus has shown us.

We’ll say our prayers; make our pledge next week; support our work; remember how God always shows up; say yes to joy and peace; and then tonight at dinner, maybe pause for a moment and remember that Jesus has shown up in our house as surely as he shows up in the home of Zacchaeus. And that as surely as Salvation showed up for the tax-collector, it shows up for us.