

Coming Down From the Tree

TEXT:
Luke 19L: 1-10

November 4, 2007

One of the books I read on my vacation last week was *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*ⁱ, by Robert Schnase. From time to time, I get asked, what is the secret for churches that grow and are full of young families? I usually answer that there is no secret formula, but that it takes hard work, a willingness to try new things, good fortune, and a dash of the mystery of the Holy Spirit at work.

For a number of years, Schnase offered his five practices in workshops on the vitality for the church. These workshops were so popular, that they made him a Bishop. Schnase is the Bishop for the Missouri Conference for the United Methodist Church.

This morning, I want to introduce to you his five practices, and look briefly at how they take place in the story of Zacchaeus – well, at least four of the five practices take place in this story. My intent is to draw your attention to his principals, and hope that they prompt you to begin to ask the question, what is God calling FPC to do? As we get into the New Year, we will be exploring that question on a regular basis.

Schans identifies five practices which are vital for a growing, vibrant church:

- Radical hospitality
- Passionate worship
- Intentional faith development

- Risk-taking mission and service
- Extravagant generosity

Early in the book, he makes a remarkable claim: Failure to perform these fundamental practices in an exemplary way results in congregation deterioration and decline.ⁱⁱ In other words, he suggests that congregations must to be intentional at doing those things which result in an exciting, attractive place for ministry. If you want to have a growing church, one that is attractive and vital, you need to pay attention to these things.

The first practice is radical hospitality. The author reminds us that Christian hospitality refers to the active desire to invite, welcome, receive and care for those who are strangers so that they can find a spiritual home.

In the story of Zacchaeus, notice that Jesus is very intentional and direct. “I’m going to your house today,” he said to Zacchaeus. What is radical about this is that Zacchaeus, like so many of the characters of Luke’s gospel, was an outsider, someone not socially acceptable in Jewish society. But that didn’t bother Jesus. Jesus consistently refused to be bound by the society’s labels. Where people saw greed and selfishness on the part of the tax-collector, Jesus saw welcome. Where the crowds saw an outsider, Jesus saw a member of the family. Where they saw someone lost and

unworthy, Jesus saw someone of value and worth.ⁱⁱⁱ Jesus invited, welcomed, received and cared for Zacchaeus. He intentionally involved himself in the life of Zacchaeus, with the result that his life was dramatically changed.

The second practice is passionate worship, and since I can’t figure out a way to put a vintage pipe organ into this story and convince you that Zacchaeus was playing a Bach fugue while he was up in the sycamore tree, I will let this practice speak for itself.

The third practice is Intentional faith development. Here Schans talks about the development and maturation of our own faith. This is the way of placing ourselves in the hands of God, so that God can shape our souls and recreate us in the image of God. For us, this would include the opportunities to learn about our faith, through the Sunday morning Adult education offerings, the PW bible studies, and teaching in church school.

Zacchaeus came down from the sycamore tree and immediately put his life in the hands of Jesus. As a result there was a changed life, (Zacchaeus’) and there were changed lives, (those of his community).

The fourth practice is risk-taking mission and service: Mission turns the work of the church outward. Instead of concentrating on ourselves, the

upkeep of our facilities, the making of our budget, we are intentionally thrown into the world around us, and its needs, and how we might be of help. Mission is practicing Christ's compassion with our neighbors. Mission reminds a congregation that the mercy, grace and love of Jesus are extended to the entire world.

When Zacchaeus came down from the tree, he began to see the people around him, that some of them were poor and that he might have had a part to play in their circumstances, that their poverty might have been the result of his activity. When he came down from that tree, he began to look at the world around him through the eyes of Jesus, and what a change that made. **This leads us to the fifth practice, extravagant generosity.** There is hardly any story in the bible that expresses this practice more than the story of Zacchaeus. Following his encounter with Jesus, he immediately gives away his wealth, and seeks to restore relationships with those whom he had defrauded. Extravagant generosity, Schnase writes, is the offering of ourselves for the purposes of Christ, providing the resources that strengthen the ministry of the church, and which help the church touch the lives of people.^{iv}

Throughout the scripture, we read that we are to be intentional about our practice of the Christian life. In this story, we see how Zacchaeus practiced these traits of faithful living. His story reminds us, that there is a time when we, too, need to come down from the tree, and begin to engage in the ministry that Christ has called us to do.

ⁱ Robert Schnase, *Five Practices of Fruitful Congregation*, Robert Schnase, (Abingdon, 2007)

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*, 7-8

ⁱⁱⁱ "House Calls", Audrey West, *The Christian Century*, October 16, 2007, 23

^{iv} Schnase, 108

**This sermon delivered by
Kent Winters-Hazelton at
First Presbyterian Church
2415 Clinton Parkway
Lawrence, KS 66047**