

“The Lord’s Invitation”  
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III  
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana  
November 3, 2013

**Luke 19: 1-10**

There’s a commercial on television for Target that caught my eye, at least in relation to today’s scripture lesson. We see a woman busily getting her house ready for a party she’s going to have for her friends. She is getting appetizers and desserts ready in the kitchen. She is carrying a basket of clothes upstairs out of the living area. She is fluffing the pillows on the couch, and straightening her space so that everything is just right. Her friends ring the doorbell, and she welcomes them with a warm smile. Food is eaten; laughs are shared. It’s the Madison Avenue picture of hospitality.

Now, maybe you strive to be like this image of invitation and hospitality at your house. But I know that for most of us, it is not nearly as perfectly-scripted as this commercial. We’re throwing all the clutter from our life into unused bedrooms or closets. We’re hastily preparing all the food at the last-minute. And we’re praying that our invited guests don’t wander into previously referenced unused bedrooms, and realize how much junk we were trying to hide.

An invitation can be extended in many ways. It can be well-thought out, with a card or a phone call or a personal conversation, inviting someone to an event several days or weeks in advance. It can be a spur-of-the-moment sort of thing, where we’re with a friend or stranger, and ask them to join us in what we are about to do. It can be to join us at an event; it can be to join us as part of a group; it can be to work alongside us toward a project. Most of the time, when we extend an invitation, especially to something we are hosting, we have given it some considerable thought and planning. And there is an element of risk involved, for we don’t necessarily know whether the invitee will accept our invitation.

Now, imagine you are walking down the street, and you hear a commotion down the block. You go to see what’s happening, and a huge crowd has gathered, screaming and yelling out someone’s name. It turns out to be your favorite movie actor – for me that would be Tom Hanks. And that actor turns, makes eye contact with you, and says, “Hey, I want to come have dinner at your house – right now!” What’s your first thought going to be? I know what mine would be. “Oh, crap! The house is a mess, there’s nothing but leftovers in the refrigerator, and Debbie’s going to freak out!”

Jesus is walking through Jericho. As he is doing so, he stops what he is doing, looks up in a tree, and sees a man named Zacchaeus.

Jesus picks him out of the crowd, makes eye contact with him, and says, Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Thankfully, Zachaeus’s reaction was not, “Oh crap!” Instead, he hurried down from his perch, “and was happy to welcome Jesus.” The Lord invited himself into the life of one of his children, and that child did not reject him, but welcomed him with gratitude and repentance.

Throughout the gospels, we witness Jesus inviting himself into people’s lives. He invites the first disciples – Peter, Andrew, James and John – to leave their fishing nets and follow him (Matthew 4:18-22). He invites Philip and Nathanael in a similar manner in John’s Gospel (John 1:43-51). In our story today, Zacchaeus is another example of Jesus extending a personal invitation. As one commentator notes: This divine calling by Jesus is not whimsical; rather, this is the vocation of God to call persons out of sinfulness into his glorious light. John Calvin suggests that encountering Jesus in this manner, as the Word of God, is to commune with the light of God and reflect the glory of God . . . Jesus calls out to Zacchaeus, and in doing so he initiates salvation (Robert Leach, *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2010: 262).

In this familiar story, we see the fullness and power of incarnation. God is not satisfied to pass through the crowds and leave the lost behind. God is not satisfied to accept the judgment of the crowds, who grumble that “Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” God has intentionally come into this world, in the person and work of Jesus Christ, “to seek out and to save the lost.” God is always seeking, always searching, always calling out to the crowd, always making eye contact, always inviting himself into the lives of you, me, all of us sinners. God is not satisfied until all have been sought, all have been found, and all have been saved.

God is always inviting himself into our lives, and Zacchaeus is our example for how to receive the Lord’s invitation. Very simply, he comes down out of his safe haven in the tree and stands with Jesus. His actions teach us that there is always a human response to the gracious word of our Lord. This redirection is evident in Zacchaeus as his attitude toward his fellow human beings changes. Without being prompted or coerced, he entrusts half of his estate to the poor and commits himself to making fourfold restitution to those against whom he has sinned (19:8). Thus Calvin says that Zacchaeus is “changed from a wolf not only into a sheep, but even into shepherd.” Zacchaeus is coming into alignment with the word of God as a new creation (ibid).

At this table, we are invited by God to share in his incarnational love. This is not a table which has barriers around it, either physical or spiritual. This is not a table which excludes people from making eye contact with God. This is not a table which succumbs to grumbling or dissent or petty judgment. This is a table where all who are seeking God are found. This is a table where all who are yearning to be invited

are welcomed. This is a table where God is always within our reach, and will feed us unconditionally through the bread of life and the cup of eternal salvation.

How might we respond to the Lord's invitation? When we are talking to a neighbor, and we hear them say they wish they had a church home, are we moved to invite them? When we are asked to help with an important task, because others see in us the gifts needed to accomplish that task, are we moved to help so that others might be touched by God's incarnational love? When the opportunity arises to mend a broken relationship, are we moved to forgive just as God has forgiven us in Jesus Christ?

As people of faith, we are extended an invitation by God each and every day - God will never stop inviting himself into our lives. The revelation of our faith is how we respond to the Lord's invitation. Are we joyful and grateful like Zacchaeus, showing abundant hospitality to God and neighbor? Are we resentful and inward-focused, refusing to believe that the Lord's invitation is extended beyond us good folk? Are we moved to pay it forward, so that the Lord's invitation might be extended to all those who are lost and are seeking to be found?

Thanks be to God for his incarnational love in Jesus Christ. Amen.