

Zaccheus Today

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Third Presbyterian Church

November 4, 2013 (All Saints)

Luke 19:1-10

All Saints Day falls on November 1, and we mark that day this morning. The longer I am here, the more this day brings both gratitude and poignancy. Tomorrow evening at 7:00 p.m. in the Chapel, all are invited to a service whereby we will remember all those who have died – church members this year or any year, family and friends this year or long ago, all those who we would remember. It is a lovely and touching service. This morning, though, we remember Third Church members who have died in the past year. We also mark the introduction of a memorial candle in the sanctuary, given by Ann McMican, Jack Mould and Leah in loving memory of their son and brother Chris. The candle will be lit at all times, and you will be able to remember loved ones. I would invite you to stand, and as we do, may we pray the prayer of remembrance that is printed in our bulletins.

Let us pray: Almighty God, you have knit together your elect in one communion and fellowship, in the mystical body of your son, Christ our Lord. Give us grace so to follow your blessed saints in all virtuous and godly living that we may come to those ineffable joys that you have prepared. Through Jesus Christ our savior we pray. Amen. We remember, O God, Christopher Mould, Jean Brown, Lucille Moore, Evelyn Kerney, Perry Branch, Robert Hurlbut, Virginia Lee Burnham, John “Jack” Kerr, Natacha Dykman, William Faul, Brenda Mains, Emily Gazley, Carola Keller, Bethyne Wagner, Elise “Lee” Hart, Marian Salmons, Anne “Rooney” Hargrave, David Somers, Janet “Jane” Brady, Jacquelin “Jac” Kennedy.” We remember them fondly for all they meant to this community and to those who loved them, and we ask you to be with those who yet mourn, that they might be comforted. And we ask you now to open your word to us, and by your Spirit, transform us in its hearing, that we may know you and love you and serve you, for the sake of Christ who is our comfort and companion. Amen.

His name was Doug. I only knew him as Doug for the longest time; it was only after his death, in fact, that I learned his last name. My barber, Douglas Lindsay. I don't know about you but a perfect haircutting experience for me begins with the word “hello,” and concludes with the words “thank you, see you next time” with no words in between, a little sanctuary of quiet and solitude. So it was for Doug. Not many words. Then he somehow learned that I was a minister. When he learned that he also learned that I did not want to talk about religion, but would make small talk about church stuff, sports, goings on on East Avenue. He was a good man, more conservative than I am, a family man, a military man, a religious man. “Minister,” he would call me. As in “have a seat, minister.” He could never call me John even when I asked him to. And then he was gone. Cancer.

Her name was Marcia Wallace. I recently re-discovered the old Bob Newhart Show, where Bob was a psychiatrist in Chicago and married to Emily, on whom I had a school boy crush. I forgot how good the show was – sophisticated and clever and much less crass than the sitcoms of today. Carol was Bob’s receptionist, caustic but never mean, on the lookout for a husband, which she finally achieved. The actress who played her, Marcia Wallace, went from that iconic show to another, The Simpsons, where she played crusty on the outside, good hearted on the inside teacher Edna Krabappel. Marcia Wallace in real life, I read, had a difficult life, with many hardships. She was a breast cancer patient and survivor. Bonny and Ann met her at a breast cancer benefit last year. She told Ann not to wait until she was older to think about detection. Good advice to a young woman from an icon. And then she was gone.

Except that she is not gone. Nor is Doug. Nor are the 20 people whose names we just heard. Nor is my mom, or those you remember, recently or long ago. They are not gone. That’s what we believe.

For all the saints, who from their labors rest. We are sad today because we miss them. When we prayed just a moment ago, did you remember someone? Someone who died decades ago, or someone who died in the past weeks or months. Someone who died at the end of a life lived long and well and fully, or someone who died sadly, or someone who died much too young, out of season?

Hear this fine poem called “All Saints” by Barbara Crooker.

“It's one day past the Day of the Dead, and this has been
a bad year, six funerals already and not done yet.
But on this blue day of perfect weather, I can't muster
sadness, for the trees are radiant, the air thick as Karo
warmed in a pan. I have my friend's last book spread
on the table and a cup of coffee in a white china mug.
All the leaves are ringing, like the tiny bells of God.
My mother, too, is ready to leave. All she wants now
is sugar: penuche fudge, tapioca pudding, pumpkin roll.
She wants to sit in the sun, pull it around her shoulders
like an Orlon sweater, and listen to the birds
in the far-off trees. I want this sweetness to linger
on her tongue, because the days are growing shorter
now, and night comes on, so quickly.”

We are sad today because we miss them, those we have loved and who have loved us. But are we not also grateful? And are we not also fortified? Doug the barber. Marcia Wallace the character actor and cancer activist. And countless others, named and unnamed, recently gone or imprinted deeply in our memories.

And Zaccheus. Zaccheus of all people. We remember him from Sunday school, the wee little man who climbed a sycamore tree. But think how his witness resonates yet. A tax collector, ostracized by his profession and appearance, with no power or access to Jesus but with a fierce desire to encounter this one who would change everything. He climbed a tree. He climbed a tree!

We were fortunate enough to see the president this fall in Buffalo – a colleague scored us tickets. I don't think I would have climbed a tree to see the president.

Zaccheus climbed a tree, and rather than Jesus ignoring him or dismissing him, Jesus saw him. He saw him and named him and invited himself to Zaccheus' house. Zaccheus stands in and stands tall for all with no power, left out because of who they are or how they look or what they do. He climbs a tree and Jesus takes notice and invites himself to the outcast's house, the Lord of life.

Martin Luther's Reformation moment, which we marked last week, happened the day before All Saints Day, which we mark this week, for a reason. People were confused about grace and God. They had been taught that grace was a commodity, sold to them by the church.

Charles Cousar writes that we should pay attention to the gift of salvation Jesus offers here. "Today," Jesus says, several times. Today. Being saved isn't some far off gift. It happens now, in this moment. And it happens not by accomplishment or achievement. The crowd has branded Zaccheus a sinner, an outsider. He is excluded and avoided and apparently, to some extent, for good reason. But Jesus declares him a "son of Abraham," an "heir of the promises given to Israel," a member of the community. He is a seeker. And rather than Zaccheus finding Jesus, Jesus finds him. (*Texts for Preaching, Year A*, page 583-584)

All of which is followed by great joy. And then the story moves on, and Zaccheus is gone. Except that he is not gone. He, with all the saints, continues to persevere by showing us what life is like, what faithful living is like, what pushing back against convention is like, what climbing high in order to be seen and named is like.

The theological point is not that saints are so special, or that they are not any more special than any of us are special. One version of sainthood sets people apart. Another version of sainthood draws the circle wide. It includes all of us. All saints. Not because we are so saintly. But because we are so beloved by God, who plays no favorites, who seeks and welcomes the lost and lays upon those who are a little less lost than others special burden for hospitality of all kinds.

We remember them this day. We remember a barber, and an actress and a wee little man. We remember those dear to us and those vast unnamed. We remember all the saints, who from their labors rest. ***And we are joined to them.***

And we remember the one who sees us hiding in a tree, despite of who we are, and welcomes us in and welcomes us home and saves us. ***And we are joined to him.*** Amen.

P.S. Yesterday 1200 people participated in the fourth East Avenue Grocery Run. It was a beautiful and glorious day. We raised significant funds for our Third Church hunger programs, north of \$20,000; we demonstrated what a vital city church looks like; we also demonstrated how to pull off a top notch event. If you participated in the Grocery Run in any way, running, walking, volunteering, pledging, thank you. A special word of thanks to the Third Church sextons. The list of leaders and organizers is long, but allow me a special word of thanks to Kerrie Merz.

P.S.S. Today we recognize two outstanding staff members. Beth Williams has been with Third Church for 25 years. Along with the tasks she tackles so competently, Beth does so with pastoral sensitivity and relational grace. Longevity means that you know a lot, but it's what Beth does with what she knows that is so vitally important to who we are. In that sense, Carol Foster, who marks 20 years at Third Church, fills that same roll. Carol is an accomplished accountant and meticulous financial person. Yet those skills are trumped by her commitment to the ministry of this place and her commitment to the stewardship of our financial resources. Beth and Carol, thank you for your commitment, your excellence, and the dedication you have shown over many years to the ministry and mission of Third Church. Your colleagues and all of us are grateful indeed.