

First Presbyterian Church
Bozeman, Montana
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April 22, 2018
4th Sunday of Easter
Luke 19:1-10

Called to New Life NOW

Change is hard. Whether it's changing habits, or changing one's mind, or changing one's life, change is hard.

In a recent essay, writer Joe Queenan mocks his own resistance to change. He was suffering from severe back pain, and ended up seeing a chiropractor, whom he describes as, "a practitioner of a medical technique I do not actually believe in." She asked him to lie on a long vibrating bed that would "help [him] relax by putting [his] body in harmony with the vibrations of the planet.

"That won't work with me," [he] told her, gathering up [his] things. "I'm from Philadelphia."

Well, it's true. Those of us from Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love, tend to be skeptical, unwilling to buy into theories we can't explain. But, Queenan writes, his back pain grew so severe that when a trusted friend recommended acupuncture, his resistance broke down. "Wait a minute," he said to his friend. "Guys like you don't believe in stuff like acupuncture."

His friend's reply said it all. "If your back hurts enough, you'll believe in anything." ("Neuro-logic," *The Rotarian*, May 2018, p. 39)

As it turned out, the acupuncture worked. Queenan says it changed his life. And even more amazing was that it changed his stubborn, resistant mind.

Change is hard. But sometimes change is life-giving. The story of Zacchaeus reminds us that people can change, and for the better. This is a story of receiving new life from Jesus Christ. This is a story which shows us that new life doesn't need to wait for when we're beyond the grave. For in Zacchaeus, we meet a man who joyfully accepted change, transformation from a profitable but unethical life to a new calling which would bring him back into his community. The lost was found.

We're approaching the end of our church's "Year of Call," and it seems hard to believe that it's taken this long to get to the story of Zacchaeus. His story bears resemblance to all our stories, as sinners called to repentance, and as lost souls called to salvation. Jesus makes the call to Zacchaeus very plainly: I'm coming to your house today. Zacchaeus answers the call by welcoming Jesus and reforming his life. His story is the gospel story. Jesus came to him, and he came to Jesus.

We don't know whether he kept his job as a chief tax collector or not. It may well be that the vocation was so fraught with corruption that he could no longer participate. Tax collectors, after all, lined their own pockets at the expense of their kin. They loaned money and did other business with the Roman Army, an occupying force. It's hard to imagine that after Zacchaeus righted his own relationships that he could keep going in this tainted business. Not all jobs are consistent with Christian moral and ethical values.

But let's go back to that moment of choice in Zacchaeus' story, that moment when Zacchaeus was confronted by the option of change in his life. Change is hard, no matter what century you live in. It means relinquishing what's familiar for the unknown. It means admitting that what you've been doing isn't working, or isn't working as well as something new might work. There are a lot of losses associated with change, and the potential for gain is less certain, simply because the future is impossible to predict. We stick with what we know rather than take risks, even when what we know is against our better

judgment or the values we claim. To use Queenan's example, we have to have a lot of back pain—or relationship pain, or psychic pain or spiritual pain—before we dare to try something new. Change is hard, and change is risky. What if Zacchaeus reformed, giving up his money and his comfortable living, and still was rejected by his people?

We're good at staying stuck in negative patterns rather than risking change. Does that sound like addiction to you? Addiction is a form of captivity. It can be collective as well as individual. So while an individual person may have, for instance, an alcohol addiction, a society may also be in denial that alcohol abuse exacerbates societal issues such as family violence, suicides, traffic deaths, and crime. The society—our society—is addicted. Addiction is also broader than the epidemic of chemical misuse. For example, our economic exploitation of the earth is out of control, yet we want more and more even when the evidence is clear that we're undermining earth's life-giving systems. We're addicted to unsustainable consumption. Many are telling us that addiction is the best contemporary analogue to good old Sin. (Ched Myers, "Repentance as Recovery: What the Church can Learn from the Twelve Steps," *The Living Pulpit*, July-Sept 2004, pp. 28-31) Staying stuck in negative patterns rather than risking change. Denying that there is a problem, even when it's destructive to ourselves and to everyone around us.

Change is hard, but change is needed. That's what Zacchaeus realized the day he met Jesus. He admitted he had a problem, he appealed to a higher power, he accepted his culpability in the addictive system which was exploiting the common people, he repented of those practices and he promised to make reparations to those he'd wronged. To many of us, the language of twelve steps rings with familiarity. For all of us, the pattern of repentance and change and new life is a call to our truest selves, the people God created us to be.

And like the affirmation that we are all loved by God, this story reminds us that we are all called by Christ. None of us are left out, because none of us can redeem our lives on our own. We all suffer from the progressive ailment of being human which can't be cured, but which can be redeemed, saved, turned around toward God. This is Christ's mission—to tell us that we are God's children and in God's eyes, we are worth saving. If someone as slimy as Zacchaeus, who robbed his own people and collaborated with the oppressors, could be called into new life, there's hope for every one of us. If Zacchaeus could be returned to the family of Abraham AND the family of God, we can know there's room for us, too.

Maybe you've been "stuck" on the idea that there's a call for you, unable to hear it or just not believing that God has a plan for your life which will make a difference in the world. Maybe you picture yourself not as the tax collector who climbed a tree to see Jesus and found himself called out by name, but as one of the unnamed, faceless people in the crowd. I suspect that all of us have that feeling at times. I'll do what others do, but I'm not a leader. I'm interested in Jesus, but he doesn't seem to have a personal interest in me. I try to do my best, but life's hard and I make mistakes and I already have too much on my plate to try to find a new "calling" from God. Maybe you've thought this whole "year of call" idea must be addressed to other people, maybe younger people, more talented people, people more special than you.

If that's the case, I beg you to reconsider. I ask you to redefine what a "call" from God is, and also to redefine yourself. The Bible's call is first and foremost the call to salvation, new life in Christ, returning to God, moving from death to life, lost to found, captive to free, out of darkness into light. It is personal, as when Jesus calls to Zacchaeus. It is communal, as when Moses led the people out of Egypt. It is saving, restoring, renewing, reconciling, bringing God's loved ones back into the fullness of life for

which God made us. And it is for all of us, because there is no one beyond God's grace, no one God does not love. You are called—by name—and God does have a plan for your particular life, in your particular circumstances, for the sake of this particular world God loves.

Chances are that the call will require some change. The Bible calls that repentance, but what it means is relinquishing our grip on our destructive ways and taking a risk, trusting in something new. Often we let the pain become unbearable before we're willing to believe that there's another way. But there is— it's Christ's way. And when we give up our attachments to old ways, and let Christ lead, we become part of his new life in this renewed world, now. That is a call from God.

Presbyterian minister Frederick Buechner's definition of vocation is often quoted. He says, "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." (1973, *Wishful Thinking: A Theological ABC*) Just take a look at Zacchaeus—he's filled with joy as he redoes his life, and the poor people he's defrauded are less hungry when he does. What God wants for us is that sort of fullness in life, that sort of satisfaction and gladness and abundance shared with all. Surely God has a part for each one of us in this drama, this play, this story of our salvation!

So run, like Zacchaeus, to get a better view of Jesus. Be ready to be called, by name, out of your hiding tree. Prepare your house, your life, your relationships, your habits, because he just might want to show up for dinner, and we all should be ready for that. And get ready to change, to live his new life NOW.

It will be the best choice you've ever made.