

## **“Chosen Host”**

### **Scripture**

**Luke 19:1-10**

<sup>1</sup>Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. <sup>2</sup>There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. <sup>3</sup>He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way - he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. <sup>4</sup>So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by. <sup>5</sup>When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home." <sup>6</sup>Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. <sup>7</sup>Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, "What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?" <sup>8</sup>Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, "Master, I give away half my income to the poor - and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages." <sup>9</sup>Jesus said, "Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham!" <sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost."

**Micah 6:8**

God has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

It was Frederick Buechner who said that “though kindness isn’t the same thing as holiness, kindness is next to holiness. It is the door that holiness often enters the world through, enters us through.” Loving kindness is the God-required character I am trying to talk about last week, this week and the next. And Buechner is right in noticing that it is the door through which the holiness of God enters the world and enters us.

Last week I tried to get at the dynamic of how kindness as a divine gift can bring a healthy character of love to our families. Next week, I want to talk about how kindness might attract people to our church. Today, I want to have us consider how kindness is that door through which we go out into the world to find the holy presence. Indeed, one needs to go outside of oneself in order to have kindness be that door that opens one to God.

Tom Longs tells the story along these lines of having had a student in a preaching course who was the son of an inner city pastor. The inner city is a great place to think of how to get beyond the insular four walls of the church bringing ministry to those in the community. Just in order to survive, one has to get out of the trap of thinking of the church as a sanctuary, a refuge from the world’s problems. In urban areas, the church must be in a ministry outpost almost by necessity. And so kindness is a currency of the possibility of a hope envisioned life.

“One Christmas vacation, my student was at home with his family and spent an afternoon talking to his father about ministry,” Tom says. “My student

talked about what he was learning in seminary, and his father talked about the difficulties of ministry in the inner city and the struggle for justice in and through the church.

“As the conversation continued late into the day, father and son decided to get some fresh air by taking a walk around the neighborhood. As they walked, they continued to talk together, and near the end of their walk, the father said, “It’s almost dinner time. Let’s call the pizza shop and order a pizza to be delivered to the house. By the time we get home, it will be there.” So they walked over toward the nearest pay phone, only to encounter a homeless man blocking their way.

“‘Spare change?’ the man asked.

The father reached deeply into his pockets and held out two heaping handfuls of coins. ‘Here, take what you need,’ he said to the homeless man.

“‘Well, then, I’ll take it all,’ said the surprised man, sweeping the coins into his own hands and turning to walk away.

“Before he had gotten far, though, my student’s father realized that he no longer had any change to make the phone call. ‘Excuse me,’ he called after the homeless man. ‘I was going to make a phone call at a pay phone, but I have given you all my change. Could I have a quarter?’

“The homeless man turned around and walked back toward father and son, extending his hands. ‘Here,’ he said. ‘Take what you need.’”

And so the seasoned pastor, through his kindness, found friendship with an unexpected giver. Long says that this is a “glimpse of the kingdom, if you will squint to see it. This is not the old world of winners and losers; that world is passing away. This is the emerging new world. These are not recipients of charity, but friends, each saying to the other, ‘Here, take what you need.’”

I tell this story as a way of articulating also what is in the story of Jesus’ encounter with Zacchaeus. Perhaps you know this story through a most wonderful Sunday School song:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man  
And a wee little man was he  
He climbed up in a sycamore tree  
For the Lord he wanted to see  
And as the Savior passed that way  
He looked up in that tree  
And He said, “Zacchaeus, you come down!  
For I’m going to your house today  
For I’m going to your house to stay

The story is one of joy for Zacchaeus, as a villainous tax collector, changed his ways because of Jesus’ invitation and kindness, becoming a generous and kind person in turn. It was interesting to read lots of commentaries on this story as I prepared for today’s sermon. I read, for instance, that Zacchaeus’ climb up a tree was something like his social climbing. In order to compensate for his short stature he climbed the branches of the corporate world, and then hid among the

thick sycamore leaves to watch voyeuristically the man of God going by. Another person challenged the popular perception that it was Zacchaeus who was short. The text says: “because he was short,” Zacchaeus climbed the tree in order to see, but perhaps it was Jesus who was short and so hard to see – challenging our cultural pictures of Jesus being tall, dark and Norwegian. Wasn’t there an artist’s rendering of Jesus not too many years ago, where he was short, bald, a bit portly and very Palestinian? Whatever the detail of the story, the centerpiece is clear, nonetheless. As Jesus encounters the tax collector, he invites him to open a door of kindness and hospitality, and by that very act, Zacchaeus is reclaimed as a child of the covenant. The sinner who was lost is found and saved.

Church ministry ought to be such a door through which we take such kindnesses into the world. “Gangs and God” was the cover story of a recent *Christian Century* magazine edition. The author, Jason Byassee started the article with the story of how Maria Edmonds, an associate United Methodist pastor in the small community of Franklin, North Carolina, was able to start a church ministry to a skateboarders gang, named *Toxic*, not by condemning the teens nor by trying to peel them off, one-by-one, but by stepping into this gang to offer them an alternative form of community.

It started with a tragedy. Robin, the leader of the skateboarding gang had unexpectedly died while along at a friend’s house. Having already been reaching out to these kids by bringing Kool-Aid to the places where they skated, Robin came up with an idea for a special service for Robin. She purchased a skateboard that Robin had put on layaway, placed it at the front of the church sanctuary and encouraged kids to write farewell messages on it. A hundred kids came for the unconventional memorial service, many coming into the sanctuary for the first time. In the service, Edmonds let them tell their stories and “have their time with this space.” The outreach turned the tables much as did Jesus’ call to Zacchaeus, that he become a dinner host. By letting the church sanctuary be a place where the skaters could be hosts of a fellowship gathering, their lives were reclaimed in a new way.

Out of this came an effort to build a skate park. The means towards the financial support of this end was a walkathon. It was called, simply, The Walk. The name stuck. Weekly gatherings for skating and Bible study and even outreach into their rural Appalachian community became known as The Walk. Instead of writing *Toxic* on their boards, the gang members started writing Bible verses and drawing the symbol they had come up with as the logo for The Walk. Edmonds explains The Walk’s success as a matter of offering “what each gang yearns for: community.” I would remark that the door through which this came was one of kindness.

When Fred Buechner spoke of kindness being the door through which holiness comes into the world, he did so after quoting advice given by Henry James to his nephew Billy, who was at the time graduating from school and heading out into the world for living his life. “There are three things that are important,” Uncle Henry admonished young William. “The first is to be kind. The second is to be kind. The third is to be kind.” When we think of what we’re about

here at St. Andrew we could do worse than to see our ministry defined by acts of kindness. What does the Lord require of us?