

United Front

Message #6 in the series "Won't You Be a Neighbor?"

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Grace and peace to you in the name of God, our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ, as we prepare our hearts, would you join with me as we go before the Lord yet again in prayer?

Gracious Lord, open us up to your word. And open your word up to us. Teach us, Father, what you would have us learn as you conform our lives into the disciples that you have called us to be. All of this, Lord, I pray in Jesus' name, and all God's people said, Amen.

While today we are finishing up on this amazing message series that we have been in for the past six weeks. Today we are closing out the series Won't You Be a Neighbor? And what we have been learning very quickly is that there are two types of neighbors. The first type of neighbor that we learned about was the intentional neighbor. We kind of broke it out into metaphors, the different kind of neighborhoods like the cul-de-sacs and the Main Street Americas. And what does that mean for us in terms of our default? How do we tend to react to people, especially as they enter into our "neighborhoods?" How what's our default? How do we typically respond? Do we close in? Do we kind of watch people from a distance until we kind of sniff out whether they are friendly or not friendly or like us or not like us? Or do we jump in or do we kind of suspect everybody is a terrorist? Because that's we grew up thinking that. What's our default?

The intentionality of being a neighbor is looking at those around us as intentional opportunities for us to share the good news of Jesus, whether verbally or by our acts of love. Why is that important? Because every so often we are introduced to the accidental neighbor who are those individuals that we just happen upon. And we have to sometimes dismantle our default in order to be Jesus for them in the given moment. For the accidental neighbor, we looked at the parable of the Good Samaritan. And what does that mean for us? Well, there's something rather unique that occurs when there's an intersection of those two. We discern people of peace and maybe we even become people of peace. Why is this important? Because at those intersections, when the intentional neighbor and the accidental neighbor intersect with one another, the central feature is that three things can occur. First, what occurs is that it's a reaching moment where the Lord uses us, the neighbor, to reach someone else. It's a very specific moment for both of us, as the neighbor and for the other individual. It's a reaching moment. It's also potentially a defining moment, for them as well as for us. And at that intersection, it's also a multiplying moment. Any time you introduce Jesus into anything, there's the potential for multiplication to occur. What does that look like?

Well, I want to take you into a very important passage of scripture. It's Luke, chapter 19. Luke 19 tells one of my favorite stories and you'll understand in just a moment. We are going to start reading a verse one. Let's listen as God speaks to us from His Word. It says Luke, Chapter 19, starting at Verse one, it reads,

"Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy." [Luke 19:1-2 NIV].

I want to pause there and just highlight a couple of things here. Obviously, we learned last week that the tax collector was an odious person, right? They were usually Jewish people who started working for the Roman government and started bilking money out of their fellow community residents. And so they were hated. They were hated even more than the average sinner. So here Zacchaeus was a

chief tax collector, and he was rich. And that tells us two very important things. If tax collectors were that bad, the chief tax collector was even worse. And we know by the fact that he was rich is that he was probably robbing these people blind by taxing them extra amounts and pocketing the overage. He was getting rich off of the people that he was called to serve. Now, why is this important? There's another little nuance here that most of us I didn't do it for the longest time. Most of us don't do it. We just take for granted this is the guy's name. But the name Zacchaeus in Hebrew actually means pure and innocent. Can you get that contrast? Pure and innocent. Very interesting. The irony that is built into this passage. Well, the story continues. Verse three,

"He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd." [Luke: 19:3 NIV].

He was short in stature. Now, I got to ask this question. I know this is true for me, but how many of us, in pure honesty, how many of us have ever been in a situation like that where you were just too short to see something? Right. There are quite a few hands up there. Right. I get that. This is why this this is on a humorous level. This is one of my favorite passages in the New Testament. So, I have to do this. I looked up a few things and did some research. There is a professor out of London who wrote a book by the title of What Did Jesus Look Like? That was her book, and her name is Joan Taylor. Joan, as a professor, did research, did a lot of studies of the archeological findings in the Middle East and she discovered something very important. She discovered that when you're exploring all of the archeological evidence, the average height of a Semitic man in that day was five foot one through five foot five. So, in her studies, she extrapolates from that that Jesus was probably, hold on, you ready? Wait for it. Probably five foot five inches. Well, right there. Oh, look, I'm five foot five, which means, I'm Jesus' height, according to Joan Taylor. And five foot five is the upper limit average of the specific and typical Semitic man in first century Palestine.

Why is that important? Well, probably, that means that Zacchaeus was much shorter. Much shorter than me. Otherwise, Luke, who's a doctor, would not have recognized this fact. If Zacchaeus was of average height, nobody would have noticed. Right? Keep that in the back of your mind the next time you look at your pastor and you say, "Boy, he's pretty short." I'm Jesus' height. All right. So, verse four,

"So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way." [Luke 19:4 NIV].

Again, sycamore tree, I'm not a gardener. These are little nuances that perhaps help tell the story a little bit more. Maybe you know about sycamore trees. I did some research. The average height of a sycamore tree is anywhere from 40 to 100 feet. It's a pretty sturdy tree. And so, Zacchaeus, in order to see over the crowd, climbed up pretty high into this sycamore tree. He was intentionally looking for Jesus. Verse five,

"When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.'" [Luke 19:5 NIV].

When Jesus came to the place, that particular moment was the intersection between the intentional and the accidental. I want you to notice something very particular here in these verses. Jesus came to the place. He looked up into the tree and he called Zacchaeus by name. That says to me one of two things. Number one, either Zacchaeus' reputation as a chief tax collector, was well known in that entire region so that Jesus, a newcomer into the community, already had him pegged for who he was.

Or second because Jesus was the Son of God. He knew Zacchaeus' name, like he knew many other things. Regardless, Jesus named him, and he invited him to come down. Notice also, especially as the next leg of this verse comes in, that there's a lot of hurrying going on verse six,

"So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly." [Luke 19:6 NIV].

Hold on to that. We're going to come back to that word. Hurry in a second. So, when you look at it for what it is, you have an opportunity where the intentional neighbor and the accidental neighbor are intersecting. Verse seven,

"All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." [Luke 19:7 NIV].

Now, I'm not going to spend time on this. We talked a lot about this last week. The religious leaders especially were watching Jesus and watching who he was associating with. And here the accusation is another grumbling. It's that Greek word that that sounds like *mumbles* that's grumbling. They were grumbling with each other, murmuring, making accusations about Jesus. Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner. I got to pause here. How many of us would welcome an accusation of that nature? Here's the challenge. It's a challenge for me as well. Unless we are accused of being a guest of a sinner at least once in our lifetime as followers of Jesus, are we really doing what we are called to be doing? If we're only associating with those that are of like mind and of like lifestyle, are we being light to anyone? Here's the challenge. All right. So, verse eight,

"But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.'" [Luke 19:8 NIV].

I got to be honest, when I read that this past week and was preparing this message, I had a very specific question that came to my mind that I had not thought of before. What is that question? Namely. What was the conversation at the table? What did they talk about as Jesus sat in the midst of this crowd of Zacchaeus and his family and friends, what did they talk about that caused a chief tax collector to be so radically changed to cause him to do what he did? What did they talk about? We may never know in specific, but what we do know is the result of that conversation. The result? Zacchaeus stood there and then he said, "Half of my possessions I will give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anybody of anything, I will pay them back four times as much." That's a pretty dramatic transformation from a single encounter with Jesus. What does this say to us? Namely, the thrust of what I wanted to communicate today.

Whenever Jesus invites himself into your life, it becomes a reaching moment. Whenever you invite Jesus into your life, it becomes a defining moment. And whenever you allow Jesus to change your life. It becomes a multiplying moment. Let me detail that just a little bit further. When Jesus invites himself into your life, it becomes a reaching moment. Verse five, remember it said, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down." This is what Jesus is saying, "for I must stay at your house today." How would you feel if after church you're greeting me in the lobby and I come up to you and I say, "Hey, Carol, today I'm coming to your house for dinner." Wow. "Hey, Dave, today I must come to your house." You know, some of us would immediately do what Dave just did. Just come on over. And some of us, you're thinking, oh, my gosh, of all days. I didn't clean this weekend. And, I mean, we were going to go out. I have nothing in the refrigerator. See? See what we do. But. But here. This. The God who knows you by name. The guard who knows us by name is inviting himself into our life just as we are. He's inviting

himself into us. That act is showing us the heart and character of God that God is reaching for us. Whenever Jesus invites himself into your life it becomes a reaching moment.

Second, whenever you invite Jesus into your life, it becomes a defining moment. Notice in the passage that we read in verse eight, it says, Zacchaeus stood there. The accusations were made against Jesus. Jesus is now in the home of Zacchaeus, and Zacchaeus stood there. There's a contrast that the writer of Luke's Gospel is doing in this story. He is showing the contrast of all of the hurrying that went on. Zacchaeus hurried. He ran. He climbed. He hurried back down. A lot of hurrying. But when Jesus comes into your life, suddenly everything stops and you come face to face with a transforming moment, a defining moment. That defining moment caused Zacchaeus to stand before he did anything else, to pause, to receive, and to allow what God was doing in that moment to transform him from the inside out. It's a defining moment. Whenever you invite Jesus into your life, it becomes a defining moment for you. Whenever you become the agent as a neighbor for someone else. Your defining moment is when God actually uses you to be a vehicle to touch another person's life.

And then whenever you allow Jesus to change your life, it becomes a multiplying moment. Do remember Zacchaeus, his behavior following this incredible defining moment? He said, "look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." This guy was so radically changed, the impact of what Jesus has done to his life has a multiplying effect. Imagine what he could do through us. Not just one-on-one individually, but corporately as a church. Whenever we invite Jesus to change our life. There's a multiplying effect. Many times, you know, churches all over America, all over the world, for generations have taught about that moment, that converting moment, that convicting moment, that moment when Jesus becomes the Lord of our lives and what that effect has on how we live in the choices that we have made. But get this, that defining moment will stay only with us unless we invite also Jesus to change us from within. When we invite Jesus to change us, to conform our lives into the disciples that He has called us to be, which is what I have prayed every Sunday since I arrived here, when we invite Jesus to change us, it's when He takes over and multiplies like He has done everywhere in Scripture. Can you imagine what would happen if we actually opened ourselves up for the Lord himself to have His way in our life, to change us, to conform us, to convict us, to comfort us, to do whatever it is that's going to help multiply His influence and His glory for the sake of His mission in the world. Can you imagine what would happen? Not only for us, but the movement called the Church of Jesus Christ.

Way too often in our culture, what happens is we say, "okay, I'm giving my life to Jesus. I'm now a Christian, now God, will you do what I need you to do? God. Will you confirm what I've already known is the right way to live?" But that's not what Jesus invites us to. Whenever you allow Jesus to change

"Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.'" [Luke 19:9 NIV].

By that He's saying, in effect, "I know nobody wants to associate with the chief tax collector. I'm telling you that no matter how bad his sin. God has reached down. Created a defining moment. That has multiplying effect. And I'm telling you that this man once hated. He too, is a child of God. A child of the promise." Verse ten,

"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." [Luke 19:10 NIV].

Do you hear what Jesus is doing? So, whenever Jesus invites himself into your life. It becomes a reaching moment. Whenever you invite Jesus into your life, it becomes a defining moment. And whenever you invite Jesus to change your life, it becomes a multiplying moment. So, as we bring a close to this series, the question that I ask for all of us. Who's sitting at your table? Who are you inviting? Who's sitting? Who's seeing? Who's encountering Jesus and us? I invite you as we close to join with me in praying this prayer that we have been praying throughout this series. Think perhaps, as you're praying, of the names or faces of individuals within your circles of influence that may be God is asking you to be a neighbor with.

Let's pray.

Lord, who do you need me to see? Who do you need me to hear? Who do you need me to know? And what do you need me to do? I am your servant. In Jesus' name, Amen.