

Better Together

What can happen when we align ourselves with God's mission and purpose

Message #2 – "Reaching Out Together"

Luke 19:1-10

St. Paul's United Methodist Church of Elizabethtown

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Grace and peace to you in the name of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. It's good to be with you again today in worship. I would like to share with you the message that God has placed on my heart and as we do would you join with me in prayer?

Gracious Lord, we give You thanks for this Your Word and the power that it has to speak life into our lives. So, Lord, open us up to Your Word and open Your Word up to us. Teach us what You would have us learn as we submit ourselves to the discipleship work of Your Spirit in us. All of this Lord I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Well we have been in a sermon series that we started last week called "Better Together". And last week we introduced a very important phrase:

**You get the most out of something
when you use it the way it is designed.**

I illustrated this last week, when I discussed tools, but it's applicable to how God uses us and designs us to be partners with Him in carrying out this wonderful thing called ministry together. He never sends us out alone. We are meant to do life together. In fact, if we look at it from the global biblical perspective, we are CALLED to do life together. If we look at it from that vantage point, I want to take it one step further today.

When we look at the New Testament, Jesus tells us that we are to do two things: We are to love God with our all and we are to love our neighbor. Love God and love our neighbor. Now this may sound very simplistic and it's not meant to be simplistic, but it is meant to be simple. God has designed us; God has called us to do these two things. To love God with all of our all - our heart, mind, strength and our soul. To love Him with everything, to put Him first. "Put God first" Jesus says in **Matthew 6:33**. And everything else that we need will be taken care of. If we love God and put our all into God's hands then He empowers us to do the second thing, love our neighbor.

The beautiful process that we are engaged in with this wonderful God that we serve is that when we love God and when we put God first in our life, He gives us everything that we need to give away.

That's how we love our neighbor. So, let's ratchet this up a little bit further. For those of you who have been part of St. Paul's church for just a little while, you've heard me talk about loving God and loving our neighbor using 3 small words together. Those words are: *Up, In* and *Out*.

'Up' describes our relationship with God, from the standpoint that that is the place to begin. That's the ultimate importance, our relationship with God, the vertical connection enables us to reach out to others. The 'In' describes our relationships with one another, our sisters and brothers in the household of faith. The 'In' is when we connect in fellowship with one another, when we care for one another, when we take meals to one another, when we're coming out of the hospital or when we're giving birth to new babies and we're sharing in life together.

The 'Out' is about taking our faith to the streets, taking it beyond ourselves, taking it beyond even those who.... dare I say it? Beyond those who look like us? Beyond those who act like us? Beyond those who smell like us? Beyond those who live like us? It's going beyond the boundaries of what looks "normal" for us. The 'Out' is what I want to talk about with you today. I believe God calls all of us to reach out together. To reach out together and to learn from Jesus himself. Jesus modeled it. He modeled it out like no other. In fact, He modeled it out so well He's referred to more than once as "*A friend of sinners*" as it says in **Matthew 11:19**.

Because He's called '*a friend of sinners*', that means that the judgment of Him is coming from those for whom those sinners didn't look like. So, Jesus in the New Testament is teaching us to do 'Out'. I think in most churches we get the 'Up' stuff, we get it. We strive to build on our relationship with God. Worship is like that, in fact worship is not worship if it's not directed to God. The 'In' we all love. We love to fellowship. But the 'Out' is a real challenge.

To help us out I'd like us to look at **Luke 19:1-10**. So, I invite you to use your bible and as I share this story, it's a familiar story to some and it's brand new to some others, you gotta' know I absolutely, for personal reasons, love this story. Let me draw you in to this account in Luke 19 starting at verse 1-

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. (Luke 19:1) Let me pause there and describe Jericho. Jericho was one of those toll roads. It was a very important road that connected the East and the West corridors. Jericho was on the side of the Jordan river valley and if you go West you get to Jerusalem. The roadway connected Jericho to Jerusalem, and it was a well-travelled road. Jesus was actually in Jericho at this particular time in the story, he was passing through like many other people would. The Jericho road is an important road. It appears several times especially in the gospel of Luke. We see it again when Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan, that's this road. So, Jesus is on that pathway and He finds Himself in Jericho where this story picks up. Verse 2:

A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. (Luke 19:2) Ok, a couple of important features here: feature number 1 is that fact that Zacchaeus is named. He could be named for several reasons,

because he was well known in that area and the fact that he was well known, his name would have sent a ripple effect throughout those Christian communities. They'd all remember Zacchaeus the chief tax collector - that evil guy, that mean guy who demanded more taxes from us. So, it could be that he was renowned but not for good reasons. It could also be that he was named in the gospel because as we're going to see, in the Christian community of that early church, Zacchaeus was connected to a story of major life transformation. Here was another example of what we have seen in the apostle Paul. Paul, formerly known as Saul was a murderer, he was a persecutor of Christians and to have his life radically changed by Jesus Christ, that said something very significant to the household of believers.

Here, Zacchaeus's story forever marked in testimony in the gospel of Luke begins to remind other believers about the power of what Jesus could do. Zacchaeus was also a tax collector and a rich man which means that he oversaw teams of tax collectors and that means that he probably took a percentage cut from the percentage cut that the tax collectors took from the citizens. The fact that it says here that he was a rich man, says that Zacchaeus probably took a huge cut. Hmm... hold onto that thought for a second. Verse 3 -

Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd, he could not because he was short in stature (Luke 19:3) And this is why I personally love this story. So, he was short in stature. It says he was trying to see who Jesus was and that means that as Jesus was in Jericho passing through on that roadway that there was a huge crowd of people following Him. So huge that Zacchaeus being short couldn't see over the crowd. Keep that in mind. Second thing that I want to draw out of this verse is that he was actually trying to see who Jesus WAS - really important. That phrase in other translations is translated as "*He was seeking Jesus*". It's a really important phrase to understand the story. Verse 4

So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus because he was going to pass that way. (Luke 19:4) Zacchaeus really wanted to see Jesus so badly that he ran ahead of the crowd, climbed up a tree, projected where Jesus was going to be walking. He ran ahead, climbed up a tree to get the height advantage and waited for Jesus to come by. This, my friends is an example of what we would call a "person of peace". What do I mean by a person of peace? Basically what I'm talking about is what Jesus refers to when He's teaching the disciples, when He sends out the 72 or when He sends out the 12, He sends them out in pairs and gives them instructions - wherever you go, look for the people who welcome you. Some of those individuals are going to be people who have heard about Jesus. Some of them may not have, but the individuals who were curious, the ones who are willing to listen to you tell the story of who Jesus is or who are curious enough to go seeking the information themselves. A 'person of peace' is somebody within whom God through the Holy Spirit has already been at work preparing them for whatever encounter might be in store with Jesus. Zacchaeus was giving all the appropriate signs of being a 'person of peace' - curious, perusing, wanting to know a little bit more about who Jesus was. Look what happens in verse 5 -

When Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." (Luke 19:5) I love that, what does Jesus do? He invites Himself to Zacchaeus's home! Last week when we looked at Matthew very briefly, the calling, Jesus' calling of Matthew He did the same thing, Matthew (or Levi) who was another tax collector He says, "Hey! I'm coming to your house for dinner!" He does this with Zacchaeus - He says, "Zacchaeus, come down here because I'm coming to your house" Can you imagine that? Can you imagine going to a parade where you know one of your idols is going to be walking by and you climb up a tree to get a good look at your idol whoever it may be, it could be a rock star, movie star and then all of a sudden that rock star or movie star stops at the foot of the tree where you are, looks up at you and says, "Hey! Come on down, I'm coming to your house for dinner." What would you be thinking? What would you be feeling?" Verse 6 continues...

So he hurried down and was happy to welcome Him. (Luke 19:6) Can you imagine that? For way too long Zacchaeus had only a certain clientele of friends. Because of who he was, being the chief collector of taxes, the average Joe or Jane is not going to be associating with him. He lived a pretty focused life when it comes to friendships. All of the friends he had were probably as devious as himself. So he was happy to welcome Jesus, another important sign that he was a person of peace. Verse 7 -

All who saw it began to grumble and said, "Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." (Luke 19:7) That phrase is a really important phrase. It speaks to a judging attitude and what it points to is the truth that there are times for all of us when God asks us to associate with people who don't look like us. There are times when God asks us to associate with people that don't look like us, let's be honest. How many of us, now that we are well into our Christian faith, how many of us have an ever-increasing number of friends who are not Christians? How many times do we seek out those who don't believe what we believe or value what we value? Jesus dared to cross those barriers and all of the other people around him especially the religious leaders looked at what Jesus was doing crossing those lines, crossing those sociological barriers and daring to associate with people that didn't look like Him. They judged Him. It goes on in verse 8 -

Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions I will give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." (Luke 19:8) I want to bring your attention to a few words and phrases. When I looked at this in preparation for this message, I have studied this passage numerous times, but there were a couple of things that hit me for the first time. Number 1 it says Zacchaeus stood there. It's a very unique word that's used in the Greek; it kind of surprised me. It's out in the middle of nowhere - Zacchaeus stood there. Why is that even there? It could have said Zacchaeus said to the Lord, "Look I give half of my possessions to the poor." But instead it says he stood there - what could that be about? You know what I think it's about? I think we don't know how long the conversation went on between Zacchaeus and Jesus that brought about such a radical change. It could have been moments, it could have been immediate, it could have been hours over dinner. But

at some point Zacchaeus was brought to humility. I think that is what is being referenced here with the word "stood there" in Greek. I think he was taken to all the reality of how he has treated other people and he had no defense. So, he just stood there, vulnerable, humble and ready. Look what happens next - he says, "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." There's 2 elements going on in his transformation here - 1 if he has surrendered himself to Jesus as "Lord". That word "Lord" is more than just "sir". There is a humble submission that's connected to it. Second, there is a response that's action oriented. Any time a person's life is so radically changed it shows itself in our behavior. Not only is he doing what is expected, he is going above and beyond. Not only does he say, "I'm going to pay them all back." He says "I'm going to make restitution but I'm going to ratchet it up 4 times as much." Here's a picture of a life that was radically changed by grace who is now showering others with grace. The story continues - verse 9

Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house because he too is a son of Abraham." (Luke 19:9) This is one of those verses that's a double entendre: - "*Today, salvation has come to this house.*" Meaning that at this very moment Zacchaeus's life has been radically changed. He has been saved. Saved by grace. Jesus hasn't even died of the cross, but as this moment, salvation has come. And there's a recognition that it came because this man, Zacchaeus, is a child of Abraham, a child of the promise. A promise that was begun back in the book of Genesis and is carried through the people of Israel ever since. He was not forgotten just because he was living a life of sin, living a life of brokenness. Salvation has radically changed this man and his entire household because of what Jesus brought into that house. The double entendre is when it says, "Today salvation has come to this house." I believe it's referencing Jesus Himself. Jesus is salvation. It is Jesus that brought about this life change and today this very moment He says, "I'm here. Salvation is here in this place." Why is this important? Summation of this entire passage is in this next verse - it says,

"For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10) Friends, what does this mean for us? Together we need to pursue what Jesus pursues. We need to pursue what Jesus pursues. That means that we as the Church together need to be concerned about the 'Out' not just the 'In'. We need to take our faith to the streets. We need to cross those barriers that we self-impose upon the Church and upon ourselves that says that once we become a follower of Jesus we can only associate with other followers of Jesus. In fact, what we learn is that Jesus actually pursues the one sheep that's lost while the 99 remain safe. Jesus' heart is for those who are not yet here. Is that where your heart is? The 'Up' and the 'In' and the 'Out' must be in balance and our mission field is always in front of us. We can't lead backwards. Our mission field is always out in front of us and I know that this is hard. Doing 'Out' is hard, I get it, it's hard for me. I know it's hard for you. It's forcing us out of our comfort zone but here's the deal: We've got to get over our own barriers, our own obstacles. Because God has a reason and a purpose for sending us where He's sending us.

What are some of those barriers? Barriers to doing 'Out' together? Well, first of all

- I have to 'go next door',
- I have to learn my neighbor.
- I have to learn their name,
- I have to learn their needs,
- I need to engage them.
- I need to cross the initial barrier of just going next door.

I have to 'cross the street'. That's a little bit further, it's a crossing of either a roadway or a pathway or a hallway if you're in an apartment. Or it's crossing a highway, I have to cross the street to engage somebody who's a little bit further away.

I also have to look for opportunities to intentionally connect with and befriend those who are different from me. If I don't have any friends who are non-Christians, how can I be a light to the world? So, I have to look for people who may not share the same values or faith as I do. In addition to that I have to cross over my own fear. I'm afraid of getting involved in other people's lives or of others seeing my life. If we're going to do life together that means I have to allow my life to be exposed. What will they think when they see how I live?

Another barrier is "I just don't care" - maybe my attitude is, "They made their bed, they can sleep in it." "I'm going to heaven; I don't care what happens to them." Or maybe the boundary is that I don't have many personal or social friendships with people who do not share my faith in Christ which we already talked about. We've got to navigate beyond those barriers. John Stott, a theologian and an Anglican priest once wrote

It comes more natural to us to shout the gospel at people from a distance than to involve ourselves deeply in their lives, to think ourselves into their culture and their problems and to feel with them in their pains.

It's so much easier for us to stay as spectators in other people's lives, but Jesus didn't call us to be spectators. He didn't call us to even tolerate each other, He called us to love one another.

To reach out, to go make disciples who then make disciples. That's the challenge we have.

Jesus said, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." Not the found.

So together we need to pursue what Jesus pursues. So, what can we do?

First, we can confess any barriers that have been at work in us, that's the place to begin. You know, going through that list, was there anything there that was convicting you? I know a lot of them were convicting me. We need to confess any barriers.

Second, let's ask God to give us a passion for people who don't yet know Jesus or for people who need love. Who need what we have been given because Jesus was in our house, Jesus was in our life. Let's ask God to give us the same passion to pursue what God pursues.

Then, let's ask God to show us opportunities to invite people perhaps that we already know into doing life with us. What would that look like? It's not as risky to go up to people who have already been friends and engage them on a journey of sharing life together. We need to look for persons of peace. Who's curious? Who's up a tree looking? Looking at us or looking at the Jesus in us? Who's already there and curious? And we also need to remember that people are not projects. We need to allow people to see the genuine love in us that's meant to be given away because what Jesus has given us.

Sociologist Rodney Stark wrote –

The early church preached, and at its best practiced love in a world of widespread brutality, sexuality and death. Christian communities did not consider themselves an "in group" which only cared for its members. They gave freely to the poor and the hungry, visiting the sick and clothing the impoverished. Christianity's sense of community and its universal charity were a major reason, if not the most important simple reason, for its growth and subsequent victory over the Roman empire.

Friends, together we need to pursue what Jesus pursued and when we do, oh my gosh, your life will become an adventure that you could not ever have imagined. The Holy Spirit will work wonders through you simply because you are willing. Will you pray with me?

Father God we thank You for being concerned about those who do not yet know You enough to send Your church to be Your witnesses out in our world. Lord we are afraid to go if we're honest we're afraid to cross those barriers especially in our world today. But Father, I pray that You would so empower Your Church - us Lord, Your vessels to be agents of hope and reconciliation and love in a world that desperately needs it so that when people see us they will see You present in the space with them, present in the house with them, present in the room with them so that one day they will know that salvation is in their house. Thank You Lord, thank You for what You have in mind for us as we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.