

Saints of God
A sermon based on Luke 19:1-10 by Angie Witmer
Plymouth Congregational UCC
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According to the MSN/Encarta dictionary, a saint is a holy person.

And holy, according to the same dictionary, is something that is sacred—something that comes from or belongs to God.

So it would stand to reason that a saint of God would be someone who knows that they belong to God and lives life accordingly: whole and holy.

I believe that's what we come here to do: figure out how to live whole and holy lives. With that in mind, let's sing our way into the sermon today with "I Sing a Song of the Saints of God". (sing)

One was a doctor, one was a priest, one was a...chief tax collector.

Yup. Zaccheus was a saint of God, believe it or not.

I get a little sentimental when I hear the Zaccheus story. It's one of the first Bible stories I remember learning. I loved this story: as a kid, I took great comfort in knowing that Zaccheus was a wee little man...and a wee little man was he. He was just like me: little. Cuddly, maybe. And Jesus loved him. Aaaahhh. That always made me feel good.

As an adult, though, I know that the descriptor of Zaccheus as a wee little man doesn't necessarily refer to his stature. It could just as easily refer to public opinion of him and his kind: as a chief tax collector, he is someone seemingly without integrity. He takes money—and lots of it—from friends and family members, from the community who raised him, and gives it to the Romans. The enemy. The bad guys. Well, he doesn't give it all to the Romans—he keeps a big chunk of the change for himself before handing it over to the boss. He's not just a traitor. He is a rich traitor. A wee little man, indeed...however...

...this isn't really a story about Zaccheus. Sure, he's a key player in this piece of scripture but this is really a story about the amazing transformative joy-filled love of God that Jesus embodied. Because let's face it: if Jesus can open the heart of someone like Zaccheus...well, maybe Jesus can do it with someone like us. If Jesus' main mission was to seek out the lost and bring them home, he struck gold. Because Zaccheus is as lost as lost can be.

You wouldn't know it to look at him, I suppose. He has everything that anyone could ever want. He's somebody—even if people don't like him, they know who he is when he walks down the street. That's something, isn't it? And he's rich. The story goes out of the way to point out that Zaccheus is rich. He has it all. Power. Wealth. A household, too. What more could a man want?

Well...a lot, actually.

Zaccheus knew that there was something missing. On some level, he knew that he was in need of something more. This story paints the picture of a powerful, rich man who is so hungry for that something more that he is willing to risk public embarrassment and humiliation by climbing a tree in the middle of a crowd in order to catch a glimpse of Jesus—the one who, if the rumors were true, could help him find that something more.

The story doesn't say that Zaccheus planned to meet Jesus—he just wanted to see him. Maybe get a glimpse of what real power and riches looked like. That would be something to see, I suppose. The way Jesus embodied the power and riches of peace and joy and the love of God. Wow.

But I digress...the story says that for whatever reason, Zaccheus climbed that tree and Jesus passed by and saw him. Really saw him. Jesus saw him so clearly that the only thing he could do was stop and spend time with him.

That's a pretty big deal, especially if you put this story in the context of the larger picture: Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem in this story. And he's not headed there for a little Passover R&R. He's headed into town for a big showdown—the time has come for Jesus to have a little chat with the powers that be. Set some things straight. A whole lot is about to happen and Jesus knows it—so here, in Jericho, he had every right to be distracted and preoccupied as he walked the road toward Jerusalem. Honestly, he doesn't have time to stop and do this thing with Zaccheus.

But you know what? He also has all of the time in the world to head to Zaccheus' house for while. That's what he's here for, after all: to save the lost. That's the last verse in today's scripture—Jesus is here to save the lost. Period. Doesn't matter if they are Pharisees, blind beggars, rich tax collectors, fishermen...doctors, queens, soldiers, priests...or if they are in a tree or on a boat or at work or out in the middle of nowhere or in the midst of the hustle and bustle of everyday life: Jesus' whole life was about showing all kinds of people in all kinds of circumstances that they are blessed, beloved saints of God.

He does it by meeting people where they are and coming to be with them where they live. And when people let him in, crazy amazing things happen—their lives are transformed.

It happened to Zaccheus: Jesus met him at the tree, called him down and went to hang out at his house. We don't know what Jesus said or did behind those closed doors. But I'm guessing he didn't have to do much more than whisper five simple words, "How's this working for you?"

When Zaccheus had space and permission to take a look at his life, he couldn't run and hide anymore...and the transformation began. Instantly. The transformation began right then and there.

Lest you think this is some great story from some time long ago and far away, let me remind you that these things still happen all the time. Around here, these things happen all the time:

- In worship, people feel a connection to a community of faith through scripture that has been passed down from generation to generation for thousands of years. That's a powerful image—people keeping these stories alive because they matter. Because they are life-giving.
- And then there's prayer: in worship, during the week, in classes, alone—those times when we just sit and make space for God to break through the cracks in our lives and hold us and heal us and make us whole. Wow.
- In Stepping Stones, people get a glimpse of what their lives might be like if they really did take faith practices seriously. Those faith practices have been known to change people's lives.

- In classes for kids and adults alike, people hear something for the first time or anew in the hundredth time. Seeds are planted that provide an opportunity for folks to see the world through different eyes.
- There are moments of pastoral care where we support each other in those shock points of life and live into the reality that we really don't go through this alone. We are one in Christ.
- And music programs and opportunities at Plymouth not only provide thin moments for us on Saturday nights and Sunday mornings, but they create communities where participants can share their talents and their lives and grow in faith together.

I could go on and on and on but we'd be here all day. You get the idea, though: God is up to something in and through the ministries of Plymouth church. No, this place isn't perfect. And no, we don't always have the best sense of clarity about what, exactly, we're supposed to be doing right now. And even if we did, we may not communicate it in a way that absolutely everyone would understand. We're human, after all. But we give it our best shot. We faithfully attempt to do what Jesus did: create a place—or places—where transformation happens. Where people can come to understand that they are saints of God.

All of this happens because of you, you know. Sure—Plymouth has an amazingly gifted, talented, intelligent, good-looking, hard-working staff. J But we're only a small part of what makes this place a holy place. Actually, the 'holy' part is because of all of you. Your gifts. Your presence. Your time. Your talent. Your treasure. Your stories. Your lives.

This weekend kicks off stewardship season at Plymouth. Oh, yeah—I saw that. When I said “stewardship” your eyes started to glaze over. Before you completely tune me out, though...let me tell you one thing: I'm not going to talk to you about money. Not today, anyway. Instead, I'd like to invite you to reflect on this church. That will be your gift for today. Because stewardship is about more than your money, you know. And it encompasses much more than a few weeks in October and November. It is about life—day in and day out—and how we respond to the gift of that life every moment of every day.

But we do take time every year to specifically talk about our response and what we can do to continue growing in faith and invite others to do the same. That's why there's a "stewardship season." To kick it off, you have a job to do:

In your bulletins there is a piece of paper. It's origami paper. In just a moment, I am going to invite you to write down one way that Plymouth has made a difference in your life on that paper. Maybe it's been in one of the things I mentioned earlier. Maybe it's something else. But I'll bet there has been at least one moment when Plymouth has made a difference to you.

These thoughts—these papers—will be collected during the offering. Just put them in the offering plates as they come by. After worship, these papers will somehow magically appear in Waveland Hall where people will fold them into paper cranes. The paper cranes will then appear all over the church—in theory, there will be hundreds of these beautiful birds decorating our space soon as a symbol of the life that God gives through the ministries of Plymouth church. I can't wait to see how this turns out!

So please: find your paper. And a writing utensil—it could be the pencil in the pew rack or the red friendship pads, a pen from your purse or a broken crayon from a kids' backpack—whatever you have will work. I'll give you 3-4 minutes to write down your "Plymouth has made a difference in my life..." moment. And then we'll offer these thoughts and our gifts in this morning's offering. Any questions?

OK. Go ahead. Write. And share.

They were all of them saints of God and I mean, God helping to be one, too.

Through sharing our lives and our gifts, we pass the word along.

By passing the word along, we shine God's light in the world.

And when we shine God's light in the world, we are truly saints of God.

Amazing.

So let's share our gifts and shine God's light and practice our sainthood through this morning's offering.