

November 7, 2004
Sermon by Dr. Lewis Galloway
The Unexpected Guest
Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24, Luke 19:1-10

The Indiana State Fair this fall reminded me of my own memories of the South Carolina State Fair. As a child, the Fair was a magical place. In those days, Disney World was still on the planning boards and Disney Land was a continent away. No one had yet heard of Six Flags, Bush Gardens or Universal Studios. I remember pitching baseballs at wooden milk bottles and tossing rings on the neck of coke bottles. I rode the roller coaster and the spider. I toured the house of mirrors, the fun house and the haunted house. In the middle of the Fairgrounds was a life-sized decommissioned Air Force Rocket that towered above everything else. Amid the sounds of carnival barkers and food venders, I remember one sound above the rest. It was the sound of the announcer over the public address system crying out, "Mike Jones meet your party at the rocket." If anyone were lost, the one sure landmark was the rocket.

Sometimes I wish it were just that easy to find our way when we are lost. Our experience of being lost is more than what happens when a hand slips away and we get separated at the mall or the Dome. It is far different from taking a wrong turn and wondering where in the world we are. No, our experiences of being lost are more likely to happen when our heart slips away from its moorings and drifts away with the current; it happens when we get stuck in the disappointments of life and everybody else seems to be moving on. It occurs when we are too fixated on being successful, knowing the right people, and getting ahead. When we achieve what we thought we always wanted, we find ourselves in a dark and lonely place. We know what it is to lose ourselves, to be separated from God and to be alienated from others.

In Arthur Miller's play *Death of a Salesman*, we watch Willy Lowman lose himself. At one time, Willy had been a man who could sell anything to anybody. Gradually, bitter reality of failure has outpaced his dreams. We hear in the play:

Willy was a salesman. And for a salesman, there is no rock bottom to the life. He don't put a bolt to a nut, he don't tell you the law or give you medicine. He's a man way out there in the blue, riding a smile and a shoeshine. And when they start not smiling back—that's an earthquake. And then you get yourself a couple of spots on your hat, and you're finished. ("Requiem," *Death of a Salesman*)

Like Willy Lowman we have a great capacity for denial. We laugh our troubles off, but eventually our laughter turns thin. The more uncertain we are of our lives, the more certain we act, the greater our arrogance, the bigger our swagger, and the more definite our tone. We are lost and do not know how to find our way home.

This is where Zacchaeus finds himself. He is lost in his own hometown and among his own people. He is lost in the midst of the crowd. Oh, he is a successful man—at least as far as the world measures success. He is the chief tax collector. He has made it to the top. Tax collectors make their fortune by keeping for themselves a percentage of what they collect. They are "collaborators" who collect taxes from their own people. They gain power and

wealth at the price of their souls. He is lost in his wealth. He is a man who wields power but is despised, who has authority but no respect, who is obeyed but not loved, who has influence but no character, and who has wealth but no life.

I don't know what irresistible force, deep hunger or unsatisfied desire drives Zacchaeus to put down his calculations and makes him want to see Jesus. He wants to see Jesus so badly that he is willing to look ridiculous in front of the whole town by climbing a sycamore tree. We would see him as a clown, if it were not for the fact that we can see a little bit of our own need in him.

I don't know how Jesus knows this little man's name, why he stops in the middle of the road, or why he decides to eat with him that day. I only know this: when Jesus says to Zacchaeus, "I *must* stay at your house today," it is more than a coincidence. The little word *must* says it all. God's plan brings these two together for some larger purpose than simply sharing a meal. God knew where Zacchaeus was all the time. The Psalm hits home: "O Lord, you have searched me and known me... and are acquainted with all my ways... Such knowledge is too wonderful for me." An ordinary moment in an ordinary town becomes an extraordinary moment of grace. Every moment of life holds within itself the promise of God.

Zacchaeus is hungry for something more than food. Jesus is the only one who has grace enough to satisfy. The gospel has a peculiar way of turning situations upside down. The host who has everything is hungry for something he can barely describe; and only the guest who brings nothing can supply the need. In welcoming Jesus into his home, Zacchaeus welcomes Jesus into his life. The rich outcast shares what he has with others, giving away half of his wealth and returning fourfold anything he has unjustly taken from others. The lonely man finds he has a family, because "he too is a son of Abraham."

Jesus changes Zacchaeus's life. Jesus finds the lost and brings them home. Jesus comes into the wandering heart; he heals the wounded life; he fills the empty soul. When Jesus comes into our lives, there is no room for false pride, for grasping after power, or for self-serving ego. There is only room for the surrender of the self to God. Zacchaeus learns a whole new meaning of the word rich. He learns that true riches come from sharing. The hymn writer Issac Watts expressed this humble spirit of joyful gratitude in the words, "Love so amazing, so divine/ Demands my soul, my life, my all."

Heidi Neumark is a Lutheran pastor in a small Hispanic church in South Bronx. Her congregation is made up of folks for whom violence, poverty, disease and death are everyday experiences. Parents die of drugs, violence and AIDS leaving behind children with only extended family to care for them. Amid the poverty of the slums, the grime of the streets, and the graffiti on the walls, Heidi Neumark has helped a spiritual family named Transfiguration Lutheran come to life and flourish. Neumark has also learned a new meaning of rich.

The children of the church had been invited to sing at the opening of Wall Street one day not long after 9/11. The children were amazed at everything they saw. After singing, the children were treated to a breakfast with white linens and silverware. The kids counted the glasses in

front of each place—one for water, another for juice and a third for strawberry or chocolate milk. One child exclaimed, “I feel rich.” The trappings of wealth were all around.

Later in the summer, one of the children came to her in tears. The children were planning to go swimming the next day and ten-year-old Danielle didn’t have a bathing suit. Danielle’s mother had died from a crack induced asthma attack. Danielle was one of 12 children. After their mother’s death, five of the children lived with a drug addicted uncle who had little time for them. The children took care of each other. Heidi took Danielle to buy a bathing suit. They stopped for lunch at McDonald’s where Danielle had a Happy Meal. In her book *Breathing Space*, Neumark writes:

She [Danielle] got up and came back with some extra napkins. Then she began divvying up the small bag of fries into five little piles, each with its own napkin. I asked her what she was doing. “My sisters and brothers will feel sad that I got French fries and they didn’t,” she explained. “I’m taking them home to share.” Sitting there in McDonald’s with Danielle, I felt rich.” (p. 124)

Danielle who had nothing taught Neumark the riches of sharing.

When Jesus comes into our lives, he isn’t just coming for coffee. When Jesus comes to be our guest, he comes to put our spiritual house in order and rearrange the furniture of our hearts. He comes to change us, make us new, and open our hearts to care for others. This guest who has nothing becomes our host who shows us what it means to be rich in the things of God.

May the Lord come to our house today.