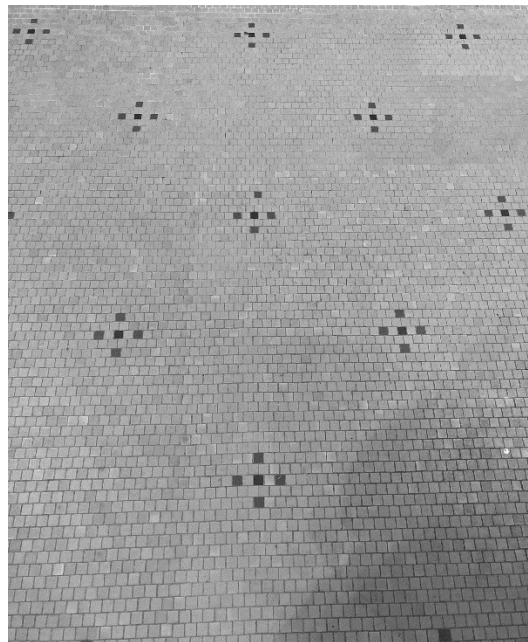




SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR
THE TWENTY-FIRST SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, PROPER 26, OCTOBER 30, 2022
HABAKKUK 1:1-4; 2:1-4; PSALM 119:137-144; 2 THESSALONIANS 1:1-4, 11-12; LUKE 19:1-10

CHANGING PERSPECTIVES



Last month when we were in Arkansas, Kathy and I made our way to Trinity Cathedral on a Monday to say prayers for her sister Susan, who had died that morning. Trinity is a special place for us, a holy place. I was baptized, confirmed,

and ordained there. Kathy was confirmed there. We were married there, our firstborn was baptized there. Kathy's mother is buried there. We all should have special places, holy places to which we can return in times of need.

After saying our prayers in a familiar pew, we found ourselves just walking around the cathedral nave—to the baptistry, and the transepts, the choir chancel where I sang as a child, and the altar around which I served as an acolyte. The memories were tied to those whom we knew in that place, all those years ago, a cloud of witnesses that kept vigil with us that day.

I saw down beside the altar to find the irregularity in the mosaic tiles on the floor. Few people know about it. That floor was laid in the 1920s, just about the same time this cathedral was begun. I've placed a photo in the leaflet to show you the crosses that form the pattern for the floor just in front of the altar. If you look closely at the cross in the center, one green tile was placed off-center. I believe it was intentional, a practice that dates back centuries where artisans leave an imperfection in their craft, a flaw, to remind them, and us, of our broken humanity, our imperfections, of the ways we fall short of the mark.

It has always struck me that they placed this “mistake” directly in front of the altar, not in some recessed corner out of sight.

Clergy have to walk by it as they go about their liturgical leadership. Those coming to communion can see the glitch as they stand at the rail to receive bread and wine.

I'm grateful for those artisans, and for the reminder that when we present ourselves to God, we bring all that we are, and God receives what we bring, who we are. But it takes a particular perspective, and a focus of presence, to see the misplaced tile. I went twenty years before I noticed it, stepping on it countless times. But it has become a gift to me, a talisman even. I look for it now, and that holy place is made more special because of this symbol that speaks truth into my life.

This morning we hear the story of Zacchaeus once again, the usurious tax collector who climbed a tree to see Jesus, and in doing so, got perspective that changed his life. My friend and New Testament theologian Jane Patterson once wrote that throughout the gospel of Luke, nearly every character is moving across the stage of the story, horizontal movement, toward the one suffering or in need, or away from them.¹

But Zacchaeus climbs a tree to get a better view. With this vertical movement he is able to see the whole of humanity before him—Jesus in procession, who surely was the center of attention for many, but from his perch perhaps Zacchaeus was also able to see—really see, perhaps for the first time—the blind beggar leaning against the wall, and the little children digging through piles of trash for a morsel of food, and the unemployed men lingering at the edge of the parade unsure how they would feed their families that day.

Do you think it's possible that Zacchaeus was moved with compassion, having climbed a bit closer to the perspective that God sees all the time. What changed for him in that moment that Jesus was able to see? Were there tears? Was he immobilized by it all, so much to take in? Jesus calls him by name, Zacchaeus, come down.

So he does, and Jesus honors him by entering his home to share a meal. And it is there that the full conversion unfolds.

Zacchaeus has spent a lifetime exploiting his power to hoard his riches. We may think of him as a cute, plump, short man

of sweet sentimentality, but he's done some pretty awful things with devastating effect on the people of his town. He has spent a lifetime hiding behind a "grim mask of defended authority."ⁱⁱ

But Jesus sees through it somehow, and shares a holy meal with the broken man who considers, perhaps for the first time, what it would feel like to release his stranglehold on money. In excitement and wonder he says he will give away half his wealth, and I can envision him moving toward the blind one begging, and the hungry little children, and the despairing men who long to work and provide for their families. He becomes a figure of grace moving across the stage of the gospel's story.

But it doesn't end there. Jesus rejoices as he proclaims that salvation has come to his house that day. Healing has come to Zacchaeus who was lost but has been found by finding his true self, the one God could see all along. He just needed to climb a tree to get that perspective.

My friends, we share a holy meal here, in this special place, this holy place, to be reminded that the healing grace of God is

offered to us this day as well, not in spite of the imperfections we bring to bear, but in light of them. A misplaced mosaic tile reminds us of that; a pudgy man climbing a tree can, too.

God can see it all, and relentlessly yearns for us to see ourselves with those tender eyes of divine acceptance, and hear the divine voice saying, come down, dear one.

Come and hold out your hands, releasing whatever grip you have on less important things; come and be fed, come and be healed, for you are a child of God who loves you fiercely, and is offering salvation to this house today.

And for that, may God's holy name be praised.

Luke 19:1-10 [*Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 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." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "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." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*]

¹ Much of the imagery that follows here is inspired by Jane Patterson's essay accessed October 26, 2022 at https://livingchurch.org/2022/10/18/seeing-the-world-with-zacchaeus/?utm_source=The+Living+Church+Email+Updates&utm_campaign=4bcaa887f5-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2022_10_21_08_57&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_0826f52b83-4bcaa887f5-108186065&mc_cid=4bcaa887f5&mc_eid=e72110616c

ⁱⁱ This description by Jane Patterson is remarkable in its revelatory truth, not just for Zacchaeus, but really for many of us.