

The Scandal of the Scared Little Rich Guy

A sermon on Luke 19:1-10 by Nathan Nettleton, 30 October 2016

© LaughingBird.net

Message

Before your past catches up with you, Jesus will try to blindside you with scandalous grace.

Sermon

Was it Zacchaeus, or was it you, or me?
Or maybe even our nation, our culture, our class, our tribe?
Perhaps it doesn't matter
It didn't just happen once
There's a place for all of us in this story
But we'll start with Zacchaeus
Not the Sunday-school Zacchaeus
The real Zacchaeus
We can be Zacchaeus for a while

If you've been rich and you've been poor
you'll know that on most counts
being rich is preferable
But it can come at a price
And sometimes it feels like the price
is about to catch up with you

Working in the tax office doesn't sound like such a bad gig
Stable job, well paid
Someone's got to do it
When the Roman occupation forces moved in
of course they wanted to tax the population
But it's expensive and awkward
to set up the infrastructure to start collecting taxes
from an unhappy begrudging population
There must be an easier way

There was
They just estimated the tax that could be produced from the town
and then advertised for a local
to take on the task of collecting it
They didn't care how you did it
so long as you delivered
Make a profit in the process and that was your pay

So you put up your hand and you got the job
Jericho was a bit big to do it all yourself
You put on staff
They worked the streets door to door
They stood over people until they paid up
They took their cut

You took yours
The Romans got theirs
Rome was happy
Your neighbours were not

You knew that if it wasn't you it would be someone else
Paying taxes to Rome was not optional
Someone had to collect them
But the neighbours refused to see it that way
They saw you as a turncoat, a traitor
a profiteer who did the Romans' dirty work for them
and feathered your own nest
by colluding with the oppression of your own people

You heard them whispering whenever you walked down the street
Miserable little prick
Blood traitor
Who paid for his latest renovation?
Us, of course
He's going to have an "accident" one of these days
And there won't be any tears around here either

It sure doesn't feel fair
You're not a bad person
You're just doing a job that somebody's got to do
You've got to make a living
You're not making any more
than the collectors in other towns
People act like it's all your fault
Being a scapegoat is no fun is it
It's not as if you invited the Romans in

Whatever
You have to be pretty careful nowadays
Even if you were a lot bigger
it wouldn't help much
On their own, they just look down their nose at you
It's when there is a gang of them
egging one another on
that you're really at risk
You've got to keep your wits about you
and stay clear of danger

Some days everyone seems to look away
and mutter to one another
The air is thick with menace
It's hard to know whether it is paranoia
or just good sense
It feels like the past is threatening to catch up with you

Maybe everybody feels like that sometimes
Everybody's got a few secrets
A few regrets
Something they hope won't catch up with them
Something that leaves them looking over their shoulder

Sometimes whole cultures, whole countries
feel a bit like that
The climate starts changing
The bushfires get more intense
and more uncontrollable
More and more refugees start knocking at the door
Asking who paid for our prosperity
Wanting their share back

It wasn't our fault was it?
We just grew up enjoying things
the way they had always been
Or had they?
Is there a past we didn't really even know about
that's now murmuring in the streets
and conspiring to make us pay
once and for all?

Is paying attention
and carefully managing everything
still going to be enough
to keep us one step ahead?
Or are we running out of room to run?
Are the old strategies
that kept us clear of trouble
reaching their use-by date?
Have we played the same cards one too many times?

One day there is a buzz running through the town
Not a menacing buzz
An excited buzz
He is coming through *our* town
Jesus
Serious celebrity value
Everyone wants to see him
You've heard the stories
Hard to know what to believe and what to not
Amazing healings
Even more amazing teachings
The religious leaders getting their knickers totally in a knot

It seems that wherever he goes

people's lives get changed
People stop being so afraid
They seem to be able to stand taller
Feel stronger
Believe in themselves again
Walk free
Breathe free
No wonder everybody wants to see for themselves
Anything could happen

He's on his way
The crowds are gathering
The main street is throbbing with eager people
Standing room only

The anticipation is infectious
You find yourself fighting the urge to join in
You're irresistibly drawn like everyone else
But you're not everyone else
It is not just that it's hard to see in a crowd at your height
Irresistibly drawn could easily mean "sucked in"

Crowds are not safe
Crowds easily become mobs
"Accidents" happen all too easily in crowds
Especially to the short people
The people who are easily lost under foot
The people who others might want to lose under foot

It was an "accident" your honour
The crowd stampeded
No one saw him fall
He must have been trampled to death in the rush
No one was responsible
No one was too blame
It was just a terrible "accident"
An excitable crowd is the last place you can afford to be

And yet...
Why should you miss out?
That's not fair
You don't deserve to miss out
What if all they say is true?
What if this is your chance for a new life?
For new freedom?
For an end to watching your back all the time?
The pull is irresistible

But the years of careful planning

of calculating the risks
and staying one step ahead
won't allow anything too reckless
How to avoid the crush?
For that matter, how to see over the crowd?
But avoiding the crush is the real priority

Get ahead of the crowd
If he goes up this street, he's got to come out there
The crowd hasn't swelled that far yet
Get ahead of them
Find a vantage point
A safe place
Hidden from hostile eyes
That tree looks good
Easily climbed
Even for someone as small as you
And a good thick covering of leaves
Good cover
You'll have a grandstand view
and no one will ever know you were there
Perfect
Up you go
Get comfortable and wait

Here they come
Bugger me, that really is one hell of a crowd isn't it?
Just as well you didn't risk the crush
They're all shouting and jostling
All trying to get close to the bloke in the middle
He looks a bit bemused by the whole thing
Like he knows it's ridiculous
but there's nothing he can do about it

Here they come
It's kind of strange looking down on all these people
You're not used to seeing them from that angle
You're used to being looked down on by them
Partly because you're vertically challenged
and partly because they've always got their noses in the air
when they look at you
It's weird to be looking down on them
for once
And they don't even know

Or do they?
Uh-ohh!
Jesus has stopped right beneath you
And he's looking up

Through the leaves
Looking for something
Looking for you
Looking right at you

“Ah. There you are
I’ve been looking for you
Come on down
Right away
I’m staying at your place tonight, aren’t I?
What’s for dinner?
Come on down
Let’s go”

What?
You’re just about falling out of your tree
Literally
The one everyone was wanting to see
is wanting to see you
To stay at your house
How did he even know who you were?
Who cares?
He’s wanting to see you
To be a guest in your house
To have dinner with you
This way Sir
If you please

There’s that muttering again
There’s that sudden shift in the mood of the crowd
The one you fear more than anything
Murmuring
Hissing
Seething
Outrage

You’d heard stories of Jesus upsetting people
by who he chose to eat with
But it was always the seriously religious people
The religious heavies got their noses out of joint
While the ordinary people in the street cheered him on
The ordinary people liked to see him eating
with those the religious hot shots looked down on

But today it’s different
Today its someone the ordinary people liked to look down on
Today its you
Someone they liked to look down on
Someone Jesus stopped to look up to

Someone they liked to despise
Someone Jesus invited himself home with
Someone they would have trampled underfoot
given half a chance
Someone Jesus is sheltering under his wing
Everything's wrong side up
And the people aren't happy
Not one bit

He's going to get himself thrown off a cliff if he's not careful
Or crucified or something
He needs to be a bit more careful around crowds
You need to tell them what they want to hear
You need to reinforce their values
their identity
their prejudices
Cheer for their heroes
Hiss at their enemies and their scapegoats
and you'll do well
But you've got to be careful around crowds
They can turn easily
They're not safe
if they think you've turned against them
you're no longer on their side
They're downright dangerous
if you scandalise them
and turn them into a mob
Don't poke the bear

But right now
you've got to walk through this mob
Jesus has called you down
from your safe perch
and you've got to lead him
through the crowd he just turned into a mob

You pull yourself up to your full height
which has never been very high
but right now feel like about four foot two
You take a deep breath
steel your jaw
and step out
This way Sir
If you please

The murderous muttering doesn't stop
but somehow a way opens
You try to keep your step purposeful
You try to look sure of yourself

A few minutes ago
Everyone wanted to be where you are now
Any of them would have given anything
to be able to welcome Jesus
into their homes
to their tables
But being envied by a crowd isn't all its cracked up to be
You've been envied before
You know only too well how hostile envy can be
Murderously hostile

But the way keeps opening
You're almost clear of them
At the next corner you'll be able to see your front door
You hope the set of your jaw looks assured
and not just rigid with fear
Somehow your self-invited guest
seems quite calm and assured beside you
You almost feel as though
he's got his arm around your shoulders
Like he's saying "this one is mine"

And then you're there
Through your front door
Into your house
"Thanks for coming" he laughs
And that's what it feels like
Like you're a guest in your own home
Like everything is continuing to be wrong side up
Guest and host
Host and guest
Who can tell?
Whosoever will may come

And suddenly all composure is gone
It's all too much
Overwhelming
You're completely undone
It all comes pouring out
Fearing that your past would catch up with you
you've been blindsided by an unimagined future
It's like a new world has opened up
Like you're falling headfirst into it
Right out of your tree
Like nothing will ever be the same again

Like the fears are falling away
Like the regrets are dissolving

Like reckless love is pouring in
Like scandalous generosity is exploding to life
Like this guest, or is he the host,
is handing you the life you always longed for
on a plate
Like a beautiful destiny
placed into your hands with a piece of bread
Like an intoxicating dream
sipped from a offered cup
Not because you are worthy
Nor because any mob gives permission
But simply because
Simply because Jesus is here
Calling your name
Welcoming you into your own home
Or is it his home now

Nothing seems like too much
Nothing seems impossible
Blindsided by scandalous grace
Seeking out the lost
Rescuing the fearful
Right out of a tree
Salvation has come to this house
Whoever's house it really is
Can't really tell any more

Handing it all over
Giving it all away freely
Nothing seems like too much
Blindsided by scandalous grace
Here at this table
Are we guest or host?
What does it matter?
Salvation is here
At this table
Whosoever will may come
Everything is given to you
And in the swirling confusion of love and mercy
all you know
is that you want to give yourself in return
Everything you are
And that's all that matters
Here and now