

This is the Sunday we celebrate the Protestant Reformation - a turning point in Western culture that ended the Middle Ages and changed the course the world would take over the next five centuries. It was not the Reformation alone that has brought us to the place we find ourselves today - the most expansive definition of 'Here' we can muster - but the impact of the Reformation has lasted and we feel its reverberations even today.

This profound period of "shift" has had such lasting influence in the world (I think) because it had to do with central questions about what it means to be human. In such questions we get to the center: Source, the "Beyond" of mortal life, the nature of what we understand as God and describe as Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Such things, central as they are to the meaning of our lives, came to the forefront in this period of Reform.

And so it is that we come today to a place of story in which three narratives come together to interpret each other. We come to this place seeking a word from our re-forming, re-creating God, a word of gospel concerning who Jesus is, who we are in his light, and what the path is that he illuminates for us now - the one we seek to follow. The thread that connects these stories comes from an article by Vitor Westhelle published the year I started seminary. He titled the paper *Exposing Zacchaeus*. Starting with Zacchaeus, the three stories that interweave for us today are about **exposure**.

The name Zacchaeus means *pure* or *innocent*, but the man was neither. As you know, tax collectors (perhaps especially those who rise to the heights of authority to be named chief of tax collectors) were charged by Rome to collect taxes from their own people. Their communities therefore considered them traitors, rich by exploiting them on behalf of their Roman overlords.

But Jesus has come to town and Zacchaeus needed to see “who [this] Jesus was.” Luke describes him as too short in stature to see Jesus through the crowds. “The word for *stature* (*helikia*) can also be translated as maturity or metaphorically, character (p3)” - adding the word ‘short’ might then describe him as one of “low character” in line with his station. Whatever his height, he climbs a tree to see who Jesus was, and Jesus comes to the tree and calls him down. Maybe pleasing to the crowd, Jesus’ words were not polite - they were sharp, imperative and demanding. Westhelle paraphrases them:

Zacchaeus, get down from there and face your own low and debased stature and know yourself for what you are...
today I will enter your home just as you have invaded and plundered the poor houses of these [your] people.

Zacchaeus, descending the tree is exposed - it is an act of vulnerability, of repentance, in which he “meets his true stature.” Westhelle describes the gesture as poking a hole in a huge dam - all that “held secure his wealth and power” disintegrated into promises to Jesus of restitution, indeed, transformation.

Martin Luther - the priest, professor, and Augustinian Monk - did not seek to become a reformer or be labeled a protester (from which we get the word Protestant). As a young man of the church he simply struggled: He understood God to be a just judge, and himself to be a perpetually sinful man bound to displease God and be punished accordingly. Luther sought consolation and absolution through confession to a fellow priest. But he would confess so much and so often that this priest eventually told him to “come back when you have a real sin to confess!”

Luther had a troubled conscience, to say the least. He not only suffered from it, he saw this same struggle in the lives of common people - illustrated most clearly in the sale of indulgences. Indulgences were sold by the Church. For those who could pay, any required time in Purgatory (a severely unpleasant holding pen for the dead where they would be “purified” before being admitted to heaven) could be reduced. To give you a sense of how popular these indulgences were, the massive construction project of St. Peter’s Basilica in Vatican City was paid for by these sales.

Luther observed this practice, and the troubled struggle of the people who believed God’s salvation needed to be either earned or paid for, **** and he turned to the study of scripture where he read these words:

God has been disclosed... the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe... since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Romans 3)

These words transformed something in Luther. In the face of all of which he was ashamed, he heard the grace of God named “gift” (not because he earned or deserved it, but because he believed it) and was transformed.

That transformation, come through the revelation of God - who exposed the grace of God through Jesus Christ to the world for the sake of the world - turned Luther into an outspoken critic of the sale of indulgences, and an influential voice in the effort to reform the church away from such things.

Luther was not Jesus, but like Jesus he called to the Zacchaen Church, corrupt and high above its people, to descend its tree and face what it had become. He called to the church to repent and meet its true stature - to expose itself and “repent - literally to bow down, to be bent over (*re-pendere*) by the weight of the pain of the world” and become subject to the same God-given grace that was its truest gospel.

Rather than do so, the Church excommunicated Luther. It's as though Zacchaeus, unwilling to meet his true stature, refused to come down and receive Jesus into his home. He confused seeing Jesus for knowing who he was. Westhelle writes, “Salvation was not promised to Zacchaeus in heaven. It was given in the very gesture of his act of vulnerability.” This was his transformation: Called by Jesus, he came, uncovering and exposing in honesty who he was. This is repentance, the root of all transformation and reformation.

Here is the third story that we see better now, in the light of our gospel reading and the events we celebrate today. It's the story of now, here, today - October 30th, 2022 at Messiah Lutheran Church.

Two years ago the first seven months of the pandemic were coming to an end just as case numbers were beginning to rise again. Without vaccinations, the church remained closed and zoom our best bet for keeping our community safe. The risk of exposure kept us home, masked in public, and isolated from each other.

With Covid surging that spring and the racial reckoning that erupted in Minneapolis and around the country, the pandemic exposed a great deal about our common life in this nation. The word apocalypse was used by many to describe the state of things. Without meaning to, they had found a most appropriate word - for apocalypse literally means *to make known, to unveil*. For us, the word unveiled, not the end of all things, but the great distances between us.

But we had church - this place where we could gather with care and with the confidence that we could be exposed - not to covid but to each other. We believe what Luther told us about grace and God, that we can face the hard truths about ourselves, descend the tree and face our histories, our true statures, our sin, our pain and fear, and that none of it is enough for God to turn us away. Rather, God comes among us to stay,

“exposed in the flesh, born of poor and displaced parents, in a stable amid animals, dung, and flies, who hung helpless on a cross and who promised to be among the hungry, the sick, the little ones of all ages, in every street child.”

From worshipping with 6 or 7 others on Sunday in those early days, our numbers have increased, but not to the extent we might have hoped. There is a significant number of people, members of this community who have stayed away since we moved to zoom. Covid and Pastor Ben came to town and church could be done in our jammies over breakfast. Or not at all. And, jammies aside, I am wondering why?

Have people forgotten about church? Did they realize it didn't really matter to their lives? Or was it grief at how much had changed in the wake of a new pastor and a global pandemic? Change is hard, and the difficulty of change has been illustrated by our diminished numbers here - yet to return to what they were before we sold the old building and moved in with Calvary. Is it a lack of trust that being exposed, letting down our guard and getting "real" is safe in this place and with these people? Have people forgotten how important life in community truly is?

We have no answers to these questions. I have tried to be Jesus to these folks, calling up those I've heard were once active members of this community. But I'm a stranger - unfamiliar. Have you reached out to these members? Tried to be Jesus yourself to these folks?

Jesus is in the business of calling us down that tree, calling us to face hard things. He does this not for the sake of transformation that inevitably occurs, but for the sake of reforging, Reforming community. Zacchaeus descends and promises to heal community. Luther calls to the church to refocus its gaze on the people gathered around it in care... In the end it is this community that exposes us to his love, that full and free gift that transforms us (even in the face of all the change we see). This is the reformation he seeks, he builds, he reveals and invites us into. That move in vulnerability, the move he makes on his own tree, holds the healing we need.

AMEN