

Under the Surface – October 30, 2016

Luke 19:1-10

Rev. Rachel A. Wann

Last week I suggested that you all take some time to engage in a social experiment. To go out into a public place and participate in the sport of people-watching. Human beings are interesting creatures and we can learn quite a bit through observing them and their actions. But my motive for asking you to do this wasn't so much focused on what you could learn about others, but rather in what you could learn about yourself. My theory is that when we observe people, we make judgments about them based simply on what our senses reveal to us. What we see, what we hear, what we smell – all that information is taken in and processed and interpreted based upon our prior experiences and understandings. This is a natural function of our brain in its ongoing mission to categorize everything it encounters.

For example – imagine yourself sitting on a bench down at the 400 Block. You observe a clean-cut young white man walking toward you. He's wearing black pants, black shirt, and has a little white tab collar. Your eyes take in the image and your brain goes into action – he's Catholic, he's a priest, so he's not married, and you wonder which church he serves. But as he draws closer, you hear the ring of a cell phone, and you watch as he answers it and you hear him say, "Yeah, honey, I'm here now to pick it up. I'll be there in a little while. Love you too." Suddenly the cogs in your brain go into overdrive. Okay, so he's probably not Catholic. Maybe he's an Episcopal priest. So you wonder if St John's has a new seminary intern. You decide to watch him some more and suddenly another young man approaches him. This fellow had just come out of one of the shops. The second man hurries up to the priest with a smile on his face. He punches the priest on the shoulder, looks him up and down, and exclaims, "Dude, that is so awesome! You'll be a hit at the party tonight."

For a moment, you're confused. And then it dawns on you. It's Halloween.

Things are not always as they seem. Appearances can be deceiving. Our brain makes logical connections based on the information it has on hand, but life is not always so logical. And situations don't always play out the way we expect them to or how we think they should. It's easy to make mistakes based on assumptions. Yet sometimes our assumptions lead to more than mistaken identity. Sometimes assumptions lead to stereotypes and prejudices.

This summer on NPR, the show Youth Radio did an episode on racial profiling. The young reporter, Anyi Howell told of his own experiences with harassment by police officers due to the color of his skin. "The first time I fit the description of a suspect I was ten. And the more I was stopped for conversations with police, the more I began to make adjustments in my life.

"I had to learn not to stand outside the house with nondescript cups, or ride four-deep to the club. Some of our friends like to keep all the registration papers in their glove box ultra-

updated. Others get nervous about how many people in their backseats are wearing ball caps.

“For as long as the term racial profiling has been around, fools have been denying the phenomenon exists. But I contend every black man in America, at some point, will be racially profiled or harassed by the police. It's a part of the DNA of our experience in the United States.” <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=5557545>

A few weeks ago, I attended a conference in North Carolina on discrimination. One of the guest speakers, Dr. Anthea Butler, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania share her ongoing struggle of living in the United States as a person of color. Her frustration was evident as she said, “We don't have humanity in this country. We don't have personhood, but exist in a reality of 'blood and death and words shouted at us.'” She told a personal story of driving with a dear friend of hers, a white man. When the police pulled her over, the officer assumed the car belonged to the man and that she was a prostitute that he had picked up. The irony being it was her car and her friend was unemployed. She commented, “These are the indignities we suffer every day.” <https://pres-outlook.org/2016/10/white-fear-fragility-will-death-us/>

These are not isolated examples. Nor are they anything new. Negative characterizations have occurred throughout our history. Whatever differences people may have with one another, they have the potential to cause division. And Jesus dealt with it on many occasions during his ministry. For him, outer appearances meant nothing. What is on the inside is what matters. The parable he told in our lesson last week illustrates this point.

Jesus told a parable about a Pharisee and tax collector who were in the Temple praying. The Pharisee, the perceived good Jew, was all caught up in his own self-righteousness and didn't think he needed God. We also learned about the tax collector, the perceived bad Jew, who so recognized his sinfulness, all he could do was pray to God for mercy. We learned last week that tax collectors were considered the lowest of the low, but in this parable, he was the righteous one. Tax collectors were despised by their fellow Jews because they worked for the Romans. The main character today is also a tax collector. One whose wealth came as a direct result of the oppression by the Romans. Not only was this a despised profession due to collaborating with the oppressive regime, it was also one open to corruption. Zaccheus had few friends among the common people.

Zacchaeus had an interest in Jesus, and he wanted to get a good look at him. He was a short man, and had trouble getting a glimpse of Jesus due to the crowds that had gathered in the town of Jericho. Zacchaeus had no luck as he tried to push his way to the front of the crowd to see Jesus. In what was probably a passive-aggressive reaction to him and his profession, the crowd closed in and refused to allow him a better view of the scene.

You know the story. Zacchaeus recognized his dilemma, and so he ran ahead of the procession and climbed up into a sycamore tree. Jesus approached the scene; he looked up

into the tree and called to Zacchaeus. "Come on down, Zacchaeus, I want to stay at your house today."

This is a surprising turn of events. Zacchaeus only wanted a glimpse of Jesus. He had no idea he would be recognized by him and asked to play host to him. Jesus was a celebrity. Any Jew would be honored to host him in his home. It was surprising also that of all the people in town, Jesus chose to bestow this special honor on this particular man, one who was despised by his fellow Jews?

The crowd did not like this. The grumbling started. It probably sounded something like this. "This can't be Jesus – what God-fearing rabbi would choose to spend time with this horrible man? Zacchaeus is a crook and a Roman sympathizer. Jesus ought to know better." The crowd had already made up their minds. They believed that Zacchaeus was a sinner and they thought that Jesus shouldn't be consorting with that type of person. In a whole crowd of righteous Jews, why would Jesus choose to have dinner with this traitor?

And then we come to verse 8. In our translation it reads, "Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half 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.'" This verse tells us that by meeting Jesus, this sinful tax collector has decided on the spot, to change his ways. He has had a complete change of heart. He will now support the poor people and he will pay back those he has cheated.

This is the traditional way of interpreting this story. Many sermons have been written about this amazing reversal of sinner into saint. It assumes what the people in the crowd believe. That Zacchaeus is indeed a corrupt man, a traitor to his fellow Jews. Someone worthy of contempt, criticism and ridicule.

However, scholars point out that the verbs in this sentence in the original Greek are in the iterative present tense. That means that the verb represents an action that is presently and repeatedly being done. Instead of "I will give" which points to a future action, it really means "I already and continually give."

This translation gives a different understanding of this story. In the previous chapter Luke told the story about the rich young ruler who was discouraged because Jesus told him to sell his belongings and give the money to the poor. The man turned away, and Jesus said, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God...but what is impossible for mortals is possible for God."

Here with Zacchaeus we have a rich man who already IS helping the poor. We have chief tax collector who pays restitution if one of his underlings is caught cheating someone out of more money than what is due. Here is a man who truly understands what the kingdom of God is about, but he is looked down upon and falsely judged by his fellow Jews. He has become ostracized in his own community, because people assume that due to his profession, he is

dishonest man. They are judging him on his outward appearances. Not who he truly is. His outward profession is hiding the good man that is living inside.

Jesus saw the real Zacchaeus and proclaimed him to be a Son of Abraham – which is the same as saying he is part of the family of God, despite what the others say about him. The passage ends with Jesus saying that he has come to seek out and to save the lost. Zacchaeus has indeed been lost. But he was not lost due to his sinfulness. He was lost because he had been judged wrongly and disliked by his community. Jesus came and recognized him and restored him to the community, back into the fellowship of the people of God.

In this story, Zacchaeus truly wanted to see Jesus. Compared to the rest of the crowd, he at first seems an unlikely candidate. But he went out of his way to make sure he was in a spot where nothing could hinder him from seeing Jesus. When Jesus arrived at the foot of the tree, he looked up at Zacchaeus and saw him.

Jesus saw him with greater clarity and understanding than Zacchaeus had ever been seen by anyone before. The crowd was blind to what was occurring. They only saw what was on the surface - a tax collector, and thus a traitor. Jesus looked under the surface and saw the true man inside.

We all do it. We make assumptions about people based on appearance or what we think we know about them. We label, typecast and pigeonhole people. We discriminate without a second thought. We regularly practice intolerance to those who are unlike we are. We set aside those who are different, believing them to be somehow “less.”

It's time to make a change. In fact, it's past time. We need to see people as people. And we need to not only acknowledge our own culpability in perpetuating discrimination and negative judgements of people who are different from us, but also make an intentional effort to change.

Zacchaeus was overjoyed when Jesus approached him while he was perched out on a limb of a sycamore tree. Zacchaeus wanted so badly to see Jesus, but he didn't realize how badly Jesus wanted to see him. And Jesus saw him – truly saw him. And he welcomed this tax collector as one who had been lost, ostracized by his community, marginalized and misunderstood. Jesus welcomed him. Friends, is that not what he calls us to do, as well?