

Reformation, All Saints' and All Souls'

Although you probably did not hear this mentioned last Thursday, what with all the attention given to concern about weather conditions and the effect on trick-or-treating, October 31st is known by some for something other than Halloween. It is also the date that is recognized as the beginning of the movement which became known as the Protestant Reformation. It is most often associated with the nailing of 95 Theses to the door of All Saints' Church in Wittenberg Germany by Martin Luther. These 95 statements which he famously prominently displayed upon that door that day in 1517 publicly declared things that Luther found wrong within the institution of the church of his day. The 95 items which Luther listed were things which he found to be corruptions of what he read in Scripture as God's message for the people and body of Christ. When he posted these items, he did not mean to divide the church but to reform it, thus the name given to the movement and tradition that began then. The other identifying name given to the movement—Protestant—comes from the fact that those who, like Luther sought to reform the policies of the church in Rome did so by protesting those policies. The church in Rome was the only Christian church at that time—and they did not seek to divide it, but institutions often seek self-preservation over all else, are reluctant to admit to error and slow to change; just like the human being who create them. This is why the prophet Isaiah was given the message read earlier. The Reformation movement once begun did indeed split Christianity into several branches. The church in Rome became known as the Roman Catholic Church and several of the other branches followed a tradition which became known as the Reformed Tradition, of which Presbyterianism is a branch. One of Luther's main complaints in the list he placed on the church door concerned the practice of "indulgences" and the way the priests were spending "indulgences"; that is money paid to the church to allow the wealthy to continue oppressing the poor and then using the money for themselves. Again, an echo from Isaiah's message. Some historians have also been suggested that Luther posted these complaints on the door on this particular date to gain the attention of the common people who would be worshiping there the next morning—All Saints' Day. Of course, since Luther himself never stated the reasons for his timing, that is pure conjecture. The next day listed in today's sermon title was one that I had heard before, but really did not know what the meaning for it. That Halloween comes from a pagan tradition or belief that on that night there is a thinning between the world of the living and the dead, I had long ago researched. That All Saints' Day was a time to celebrate, acknowledge, give thanks and pray for all those who have lived lives of faith and whose lives have been examples to others was something with which I had been familiar for many years. But this year I decided to explore the meaning of that third day, November 2. Just what does All Souls' Day represent. Although All Saints' Day is more ecumenical, All Souls' Day seems more associated with the Roman Catholic traditional understanding of purgatory—and according to the research I found, it is a day set aside to pray for all those who have departed this life or according to another source all those baptized who have departed this life. This is without reference to the faithfulness of that life. The references were not exactly clear to me; the theological basis for these prayers certainly wasn't. But these historical connections seem to explain this cluster of events on the church calendar. However,

what these three observations seem to have in common is how complicated we, as human beings make the relationships which Jesus desires to have with us and for us to have with each other. The question then is what does this human tendency have to do with the narrative of Jesus and Zacchaeus found in Luke's gospel? In the text I read from Luke's gospel, Jesus enters Jericho and is walking through the village. As has been the case for much of this journey, everywhere Jesus goes it seems there is a crowd—everything that happens is in the public domain—on display. So the setting of this story takes place in front of a crowd—a crowd who knows the individual that Luke quickly names and describes. And the description is not complementary. "A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich." Zacchaeus wasn't just collecting taxes from his neighbors, which would be bad enough he was overseeing others who also who did it...and he was rich...never a good thing in Luke's gospel. The description sets up a bias against Zacchaeus as we read the story. The assumption is that he is unethical and is unfairly using his position to enrich himself. Zacchaeus, we are told has another problem. He wants to see this man Jesus, but on account of the crowd, because he was short in stature, he cannot see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. Luke tells us Zacchaeus does this because he wants to see "who Jesus was." Zacchaeus is curious about Jesus. Zacchaeus does not plan to contact Jesus. He does not plan to ask Jesus for anything. He is just curious and wants to see who Jesus is. There is no indication that Zacchaeus is feeling remorseful about being wealthy; that there is anything in his life that he feels is morally or ethically out of kilter. It is Jesus who makes the contact. "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.'" Zacchaeus does not invite Jesus; Jesus has sought him out and honored him with by inviting himself to come to Zacchaeus' home. Now Zacchaeus does hurry down. We are told he is happy to welcome Jesus to his house, but aside from offering welcome, he makes no other gestures; he offers no signs of guilt that a famous rabbi is coming to dine at his table. As mentioned before, this is all done before a crowd, and now the crowd makes its presence known. "All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'" This is where this story and the remarks about tradition become relevant. Our usual understanding of this narrative is that Zacchaeus the tax collector repents of his tax collecting ways when he encounters Jesus. We sometimes point out that Jesus seeks Zacchaeus out before he ever makes any effort to repent; but in fact, that is not all that happens. We understand that God seeks us out while we are still sinful. However, Jesus seeks Zacchaeus out before there is any promise to make restitution. It is the promise of restitution which is what we read in the usual translation which follows the crowd's grumbling. "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.'" That is what we usually see as a sign that Zacchaeus has repented of his tax collecting ways. What is interesting is that the Greek verb tense is actually translated simply as a present tense everywhere else except this verse where it is given a special grammatical category—present future tense—which is found nowhere else. Nowhere else. According to Young's Literal translation Luke 19:8 should read: "And Zacchaeus having stood, said unto the Lord, 'Lo, the half of my goods, sir, I give to the poor, and if of any one anything I did take by false accusation, I give back fourfold.'" So what is going on with the story and with the translation? It seems that here translator have created a grammatical text to accommodate

one of the most cherished Christian ideas: the idea that repentance always precedes salvation because Jesus pronounces salvation has come to Zacchaeus' house. Two things seem to be at work here. First, it is hard for us to believe that a sinner could receive salvation without first repenting. And since Jesus says, "Today, salvation has come to this house" this must mean that Zacchaeus has repented, right? Yet there it is. Jesus has singled out Zacchaeus in order to stay with him, honoring him with his presence...much to the chagrin of the crowds...And then Jesus honors him a second time by not arguing with his claim of righteous behavior but instead affirming it, declaring that no matter how the crowds may view him, Zacchaeus is indeed a child of Abraham, one of the covenant people, a beloved child of God. This chief tax collector is one of God's own and even more, lives like it. In fact, although the 95 Thesis began the Reformation Movement, Luther's study of scripture led him to question many things about what the church taught about God, things which constantly demanding penance for sin from those who came to confess to the priests. One of the most fundamental things that he felt the church got wrong was God's nature, a nature demanding punishment for sin. Many of us struggle with this as well, trying to imagine that God would just forgive sin, apart from some meaningful repentance. After all, if God just forgave us, what would become of God's justice? Perhaps, in a way, God doesn't care about justice in the same manner that we do? That doesn't mean that God doesn't value justice, but for Scripture tells us that God does value how we treat one another, but perhaps God's views these things through a different lens. Maybe justice is our way of tracking each other, our way of defining each other, of keeping count, of keeping score, of following who's in and who's out, who's up and who's down. If this is so, If God's love regularly trumps God's justice—and if Jesus dies precisely to show us that it is—then we're operating with flawed categories. God, Jesus, the whole biblical story, isn't primarily about justice, but about relationship, God's deep, abiding, tenacious desire to be in relationship with each and all of us. The Reformation was all about the insight that Luther had, which can be seen in the story of Zacchaeus, that it is the righteousness of God that is given to us freely, unconditionally in Christ that brings salvation to us. That God comes to us. That God seeks us out in order to declare that salvation has come to us. That is a lesson we have from the Reformation, from the Saints who have gone before us and from the wee little man who climbed up the sycamore tree. Thanks be to God.

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