

Becoming Myself

1st Sunday after the Epiphany – January 6/7, 2007

Sermon Background Study

Luke 19:1-10 (NRSV)

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When 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.” ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” ⁸Zacchaeus 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.” ⁹Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

The heart of Christianity is about the transformation of our lives. Every bit, top to bottom, inward and outward, transformed into a life of joy, peace, contentment, satisfaction, love, and more. Beginning with this four-week sermon series, we'll learn how to find the lives we've always wanted.

Are you disappointed with yourself, your life? Are you the father you want to be? The mother? The husband? The wife? The son? The daughter? The friend? The disciple? Are you leading the life you've always wanted?

Most of us would answer no. I know that I'm not always the father I want to be, nor the husband. Yes, God has transformed my life over the last nine years, but still . . . I disappoint myself. I know that I am not yet fully the person that God created me to be.

At the heart of Christianity lies this transformation, this renewing of our entire selves so that we might each become the unique person that God created. Hence, Soren Kierkegaard's insightful prayer, “And now Lord, with your help I will become myself.” The Christian life, the life lived before God, is less about doing the right things than it is *becoming the right person*.

When Moses walked over to the burning bush, he didn't have a clue who God had created him to be. When God revealed Moses' startling mission, all Moses could see were the problems and his own inadequacies. Yet, God promised Moses that he could be more and do more than he had ever imagined – for the LORD God would be with him (Exodus 3:12).

Zacchaeus

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector (see p. 2 text box), every bit as much an outcast as the blind beggar. Already contemptible in the eyes of his fellow Jews, Zacchaeus subjects himself to further ridicule. This little tax collector runs to catch a glimpse of Jesus even though it was most unseemly for a Jewish man to run. Zacchaeus also climbs a tree; something else unbecoming for a grown man. Perhaps because Zacchaeus has made such a spectacle of himself, Jesus spots him in the tree and, as was his custom, he goes to Zacchaeus' home. In fact, Jesus invites himself.

Can you imagine the joy Zacchaeus must have felt as he welcomed Jesus? Of course, the townsfolk didn't much like Jesus entering the home of the hated tax collector, but Jesus always seemed to hang around with the wrong sorts of people. Having invited himself into Zacchaeus' home, what happens next will be Jesus' miracle.

Zacchaeus asks nothing of Jesus, not even a question. He simply steps forward and, without prompting, commits to giving half of his ill-gotten possessions to the poor – not all, but half. Then, in keeping with the most stringent interpretation of the ancient Judaic law, Zacchaeus promises that he will repay four-fold those he has defrauded. Zacchaeus' repentance and generosity demonstrate that he is a “son of Abraham.” He was lost, but now is found.

Notice that Jesus does not ask Zacchaeus to give up all he has. Nor does it seem that Zacchaeus abandoned his life to follow Jesus. Rather, Zacchaeus is redeemed *in* his life. He is transformed within the life he is living. By God's grace, Zacchaeus points his transformed life toward repentance and away from exploitation. He will be generous to the poor. He will make amends to those he has wronged. He will stay a tax collector, but he will now conduct himself with honor and justice. He will heed John the Baptist's teachings to tax collectors: “Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you” (Luke 3:13). Zacchaeus will “bear fruits worthy of repentance” (Luke 3:8). Even after giving away half of his wealth and making reparations, Zacchaeus would have still been a wealthy and powerful man. But now, he will use his wealth and power and talents for God's purposes. He will be a force for good, pointing others toward just and generous lives.

Zacchaeus' is another story of transformation. The people whom Zacchaeus had exploited surely would have thought him to be beyond the possibility of redemption and transformation. What could there be to salvage in a man who had sold his soul to the Romans? Yet, when Zacchaeus encounters Jesus, he is saved, for transformation is the essence of salvation. He was lost and yet is found.

We sometimes make the mistake of thinking of salvation only as a one-time event, an instant when we are made right with God by virtue of our faith in Jesus Christ, which is itself a gift from God. Yet, being saved is just as much a process. Paul urges believers to work out their own salvation (Philippians 2:12). As Roger Olson puts it, salvation is both gift *and* task.¹ But to say that salvation is a task, as well as a gift, is not to deny that it is all God's work. For, after telling the Philippians to work out their salvation, Paul, in the very same sentence, writes, "for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure."²

Metamorphosis

In his book, *Finding the Life You've Always Wanted*, John Ortberg³ helps us to understand what we are really talking about when we speak of "spiritual growth" or "spiritual formation." It is not as if we lead a "spiritual life" that is compartmentalized from the rest of our life. Rather, when we speak of our spiritual life, we are speaking of the very center of who we are. It is the sum, not a part, of the person God created us to be. There is no authentic spiritual life that is lived on the margins, no Christian spirituality that can be dabbled in. There are no cookbooks or formulae that comprise this life. Rather, it is about a complete metamorphosis⁴, a transformation from our self-centered selves to Christ-centered selves. It is no less a transformation than the metamorphosis of a caterpillar into a butterfly (you might check out St. Andrew's rose window).

Tax Collectors

Zacchaeus was a tax collector, but the Roman tax system was nothing like our IRS. Rome would contract out the collection of taxes in geographic areas. The winning entrepreneurial bidder would agree to pay the contracted amount of taxes to Rome. The tax entrepreneur would then put together an organization to do the actual collection. The winning bidder would employ chief tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, who made the whole thing work. Zacchaeus would have employed lower-level collectors, like Jesus' disciple Matthew, who would man toll booths and other small tax collection businesses. In all, it was one of the largest enterprises of that time.

In the Roman system, tax collectors would be free to collect all the money they could and keep whatever wasn't owed Rome under the contract. Thus, not only were they agents of the Roman oppressors, we can only imagine the methods they employed in gaining their wealth. Not surprisingly, in the Gospels tax collectors are usually lumped in with the prostitutes.

Paul's mission to the Gentiles is to preach "the Gospel of God" and "bring about the obedience of faith" (Romans 1:1,5). This obedience is not about following a bunch of rules, nor forcing ourselves to be kind or just or humble because that is what Jesus said to do. The obedience of faith is about doing as Christ would have us do because we want to. We have been made so that we can truly love from a desiring heart. We seek genuine transformation so that we will no longer have to try to reflect Christ to others, to be the light to the world, but so that we will simply be the light. A light bulb doesn't have to try to make light, it simply does.

A year of transformation

We invite you to join us in making 2007 a year of transformation. Our goal is to "morph" into people who are mature in Christ in all things and at all times, in whom doing what comes naturally is grounded always in the love of God and neighbor. As we'll see next week, this takes more than trying . . . it takes training.

¹This is another of the "both/ands" of the Christian faith, similar to our claim that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. One of the best books I've found on this is Roger Olson's, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief: Twenty Centuries of Unity and Diversity*. The book is organized into fifteen "both/ands," such as salvation being *both* gift *and* task and the kingdom of God being *both* "already" *and* "not yet."

²Christians have used a lot of vocabulary to talk about salvation and the Bible has many images of what we mean by salvation. For example, Christians will sometimes use "salvation" to describe the event and "sanctification" to describe the process. But the Bible takes a very large and expansive view of salvation and trying to cut the lines too exactly can diminish our ability to embrace the larger picture.

³John Ortberg's book is the basis for this sermon series. Ortberg acknowledges that his goal in writing the book was to give readers a sort of "Dallas Willard-lite," as Willard is one of the great thinkers, teachers, and writers about spiritual formation. Ortberg has done a great job and I hope you'll take the time to read his book this month. You'll find it an enjoyable and rewarding read. Copies are available in the St. Andrew bookstore.

⁴"Metamorphosis" comes from the Greek, *metamorphoo*: "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed (*metamorphoo*) by the renewing of your minds, . . ." (Romans 12:2). *Metamorphoo* is derived from the Greek word, *morphoo*, which means "to form" or "to fashion." It is used once in the NT (Gal. 4:19) where Paul compares our growth in Christ to our formation in the womb. In his *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* entry on *morphoo*, G. Kittel writes, "This growth is an ongoing process, both open and secret, both gift and task, with maturity as the goal."

Reading With Heart & Mind

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Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Genesis 11:1-9 The tower of Babel. The flood does not enable the renewal of God's creation. God will take another way.</p>	<p>Monday Genesis 12:1-9 God chooses one person, Abram, through all of the cosmos will be renewed and restored. Note that all humanity will be blessed through Abram.</p>
<p>Tuesday Genesis 12:10-20 The story of Abram and Sarai in Egypt is a tale that will be repeated twice more in Abram's family. What does this brief story reveal to you about each of the key players? What is the point of this story? See chapters 20 and 26 for the other stories.</p>	<p>Wednesday Genesis 15 This is the great chapter on the covenant the God makes with Abram. What does God covenant to do? What does Abram covenant to do? Notice the statement of Abram's faith in v. 6 and the manifestation of God in v. 17.</p>
<p>Thursday Genesis 16 The story of Hagar and Ishmael. Who rescues Hagar? What promises are made?</p>	<p>Friday Genesis 17 God gives Abram a sign of the covenant they have made. What is asked of Abram this time? Why are they renamed Abraham and Sarah? What promise does God make?</p>
<p>Saturday Genesis 18:1-15 Sarah laughs at the idea she would have a baby. Why is she afraid to admit it? What do you make of the visitors?</p>	

Sermon Notes

The Winter Session of the St. Andrew Academy begins this week!!
On-line registration is available at www.standrewacademy.org.
It is NOT too late to register!

We've got a great line-up of classes for the winter St. Andrew Academy session. Classes include *The Gospel of John*; *Christianity and World Religions*; a new *Beth Moore Study* on the book of Daniel; *Six Strategies to Great Parenting*; *Discovering God's Will for Your Life*; *Finding Purpose Through Your Spiritual Gifts*; *The Miracles of Jesus*; *The Power of the Prophets*; *Spiritual Man-laws: Discussing Fella-ship in Church*; *Christian Meditation and Movement*; *Experiencing Philipians*; *Transformation: Sounds like a lot of work to me!*, and *A Faith to Live By*.

As you can see, this is one of the most exciting set of classes we've ever offered. We can't find the lives we seek merely by trying, it takes training and learning. Make plans now to join us for one or more of these classes. You'll be glad you did. As always, free childcare is available.

January Book Recommendation
***The Life You've Always Wanted*, by John Ortberg**

"What does the true spiritual life look like? What keeps you from living such a life? What can you do to pursue it? If you're tired of the status quo – if you suspect there is more to Christianity than you've experienced – John Ortberg points to a road of transformation and spiritual vigor that anyone can take." I highly recommend this book. It is one of those rare books that is easy to read and richly rewarding. The sermon series is a good start, but there is much more here.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

John Ortberg asks us to consider whether we are settling for "pseudo-transformation" or seeking the real thing. Are we staying on the fringes, dabbling, or are we getting to the very center of our spiritual lives – which is our whole life! He offers five questions we can ask ourselves. How would you answer these?

1. "Am I spiritually 'inauthentic'?"
Do I try to sound spiritual or seem spiritual to others?
2. "Am I becoming judgmental or exclusive or proud?"
There's a reason that pride is often described as the sin from which all other sins flow.
How often do you try to raise yourself up by lowering others?
3. "Am I becoming more approachable, or less?"
4. "Am I growing weary of pursuing spiritual growth?"
Ortberg quotes Steven Mosely: "Tragically, conventional religious goodness manages to be both *intimidating* and *unchallenging* at the same time." What do you think Mosely means?
Do you agree? How have you seen this played out in your own life?
5. "Am I measuring my spiritual life in superficial ways?"
It ought to be deeper than having said a prayer today or reading your Bible. What would be some more meaningful measures of spiritual growth?