

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**

**Twenty-fourth Sunday of Pentecost/Ordinary Time – October 30, 2016 - All Souls**

**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**Luke 19:1-10**

**For Reflection**

**“I have been finding treasures in places I did not want to search. I have been hearing wisdom from tongues I did not want to listen. I have been finding beauty where I did not want to look. And I have learned so much from journeys I did not want to take. Forgive me, O Gracious One; for I have been closing my ears and eyes for too long. I have learned that miracles are only called miracles because they are often witnessed by only those who can see through all of life's illusions. I am ready to see what really exists on other side, what exists behind the blinds, and taste all the ugly fruit instead of all that looks right, plump and ripe.”**

- Suzy Kassem, (b.1975) American author, filmmaker, philosopher, cultural critic, essayist, and poet of Egyptian descent, Rise Up and Salute the Sun: The Writings of Suzy Kassem

**Looking Up**

Sycamore trees indigenous to the Jordan are not like California Sycamores. They are low growing and easy to climb – especially for short people like Zacchaeus – who just needed to be a few feet up to be able to see over the crowd. And Jesus probably saw his feet which probably why he looked up - to see whose feet were firmly planted in his line of vision.

People didn't like Zacchaeus. Israel and Judah were territories occupied by the Roman Empire – and Zacchaeus worked for the enemy – collecting taxes to be used by the Roman elite to pay the soldiers for their oppressive occupation. He also used his position to defraud people out of extra cash for his own profit – something employees of oppressive regimes sometimes do – as corruption is rampant and tends to corrupt anyone within the system.

And knowing that people were shorter back then – if Zacchaeus was deemed short in the year 30ce – he must have been REALLY short – which may have led to a chip on his shoulder – and the desire for revenge against neighbors who made fun of him in school or mocked him in the street. Bullies and their targets didn't just come along in the last century. We can relate to his situation without much effort.

People didn't like Zacchaeus and he didn't like them much either. And that's not a comfortable place to be. Sitting in a tree isn't that comfortable either – but it served a purpose and worked out well. Like his elevated position and wealth, it caused people to look up to him whether they wanted to or not. *Nanner nanner.*

Now Jesus/Yeshua was the kind of guy who liked to find people in trouble and help them out. He was always looking around and under things – and looking up, apparently, to find sad mad short people sitting in trees – people elevating themselves in order to feel better about themselves. Yeshua urges this guy to come on down, ground himself, put himself on everyone else's level. And then he invites himself over to Zacchaeus' house – which triggers an angry grumbling from Zacchaeus neighbors – and a repentant speech from the man himself.

8 Zacchaeus stood there and said...

**"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."

Now there is a little bit of hedging here as he says "IF I have defrauded anyone of anything..." He knows full well whether he has defrauded people or not. But this is perhaps a problem of translation from Greek to English – or a habit of speech that allows a guilty person to save some face – who knows. But Jesus seems to take him as his word and declares him duly redeemed. And if Zacchaeus actually DOES pay people back fourfold – he'll be making some new friends and be a happier man in the future. And if he also gives half of what he owns to the poor – he will also be opting for a more modest lifestyle – which will certainly help him live more appropriately within the society of which he is a member. It will put him on the same level as his neighbors which is where one finds true friends and allows for mutual respect.

Which brings me to the 1% in our society – who are paraded in front of us on shows like "Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous" – and Kardashian reality t.v. Talk about people who have climbed trees... I found out this week, for instance, that there are \$800,000 watches that will measure the force of a golf swing. There are \$100,000 bottles of perfume – fragrances that are designed for an individual's body chemistry and specific odor preferences. There are ridiculously expensive items of lingerie with diamonds sewn into them – which I can't imagine are very comfortable. And one particular famous person built a private water park in her backyard for her children so they don't have to go to a public place like Raging Waters and be swamped with paparazzi.

We all have to look up to see the bottom of their bank accounts. And it is getting harder and harder for the rich and famous to protect themselves from exposure to the poverty and suffering of the world – thanks to news and social media. Therefore, it is getting harder for members of the 1% to enjoy guiltless pleasure in their wealth – unless that person is a megalomaniac – or incredibly shallow. We've got some one percenters who have stepped up – sent millions of dollars to vaccinate children in Africa – set up foundations that lift hundreds of thousands of people out of poverty – demanded that they be taxed more to support our national infrastructure. Kudos to our friends in the trees who have a conscience and are making a difference.

But to keep things in perspective – there are also those who have to look up to see the bottom of OUR bank accounts. One of Peter’s friends lived across the street from us in a converted garage for 10 years. We made it a point to take him to the movies, invite him to parties, take him to Hansen Dam. He enjoyed coming over to our house which has a large yard, playing with Peter’s toys and our dog. He also took some pleasure in trashing Peter’s room, throwing his toys out into the yard and breaking a few things. Class warfare takes many forms. He made his point.

His family moved last month to a two-bedroom home in Altadena. We are happy for them and look forward to more mutuality in our future playdates. It doesn’t always turn out this way. And it isn’t easy to deliberately engage in cross-class relationships – especially if we are the ones guilty of having “more.” Unless we are megalomaniacs and don’t mind being paternalistic.

Church is often where the cross-class-relationship experiment takes place – challenging us to be human with each other rather than measuring our relative worth by our bank accounts. It has not been a successful experiment in most cases. Once the church gained political and social power in the Roman Empire – the upholding of the class system became part of Christian theology. Pope Francis is doing what he can to undermine that multi-millennial habit in Rome – may he succeed in his time.

Even though we are Protestants, the People’s Pope can and does remind us to look up from our navels and review our own behavior in the current social order. We need to ask ourselves how we are doing and how we might do better.

I may have told you about the deacon in a church I served who met a homeless man wearing shorts and a tee shirt at the door of the church Sunday morning and told him he could come in if he came back in a suit. Then there were the women’s fellowship gals who saved their used tea bags to ship to Africa for their use in making slightly weaker yet palatable tea. Some comedian used to go on about “Fondu pots for Namibia” – making fun of inappropriate charitable acts – always something to watch out for. And who can forget the radiation scare of the 1950’s when it was believed that cranberry sauce had been irradiated and people were urged to purge cans of said staple from their cupboards. Guess where those cans ended up? Holiday baskets given out by churches to the poor. This is charity at its worst.

But how might we engage in lowering ourselves gracefully out of our trees and grounding ourselves with our neighbors – creating fair and equal access to resources that we, often, take for granted?

As Mt. Hollywood UCC we may have thought we were unloading a beloved, beautiful yet aging albatross when we sold our home of 100 years. But we were also choosing

to live more appropriately in our neighborhood – stepping off whatever pedestal or sycamore the building gave this group – and choosing to walk on the ground like everyone else. It may not have been consciously done – but it is a benefit of the choice that we might look at and enhance.

We can now commiserate with the renting class – but with some understanding of where the landlord might be coming from – and foster mutual support.

We can see the groups that share this worship space for 12-step work with some amount of compassion – as they struggle to rise-up from hitting bottom and need some help figuring out appropriate behaviors and treatment of this space.

We can look at our church bank account and be creative about how it might be used to best level the social playing field in our neighborhood and beyond.

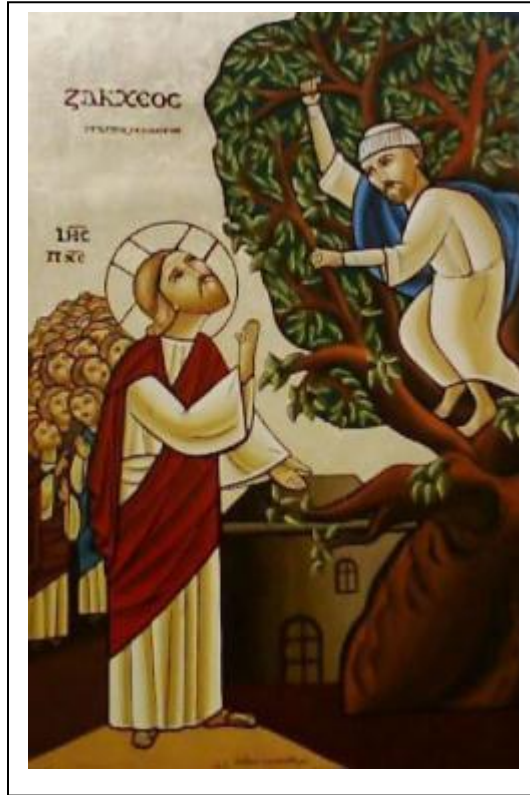
We can comb through our minimal free time to find just a small piece that might be contributed to social rehabilitation – repairing breaches – being kind – teaching responsibility – giving food and personal items to folks who can't afford to buy these AND afford their rent and medicine – voting in every election on the side of justice – speaking truth to power – lamenting and praying and then getting up and stepping up to support our neighbors who may or may not make it out of those converted garages.

Five of us went to our UCC Association meeting yesterday to hear Rev. Traci Blackmon, Acting Executive Minister for Justice and Witness Ministries with our national UCC office and one of the founders of “Black Lives Matter”. She was awesome – preached barefoot – and told her riveting story which brought us into the streets of Ferguson – and nudged us toward the streets of the “Ferguson near you.”

And she reminded us that the job of white people isn't to fight FOR people of color but to BE WITH people of color in THEIR fight. The job of white people is to examine constantly our privilege – become conscious of it – and check it – let go of control we may not even know we have.

We need to come down from our trees and join the crowd in the street.  
That's where our passions meet the needs of the world.  
That's where Jesus is.

Let's go.



Scripture Reading for Sunday October 30, 2016 – Pentecost 22 – Year C

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### **Luke 19:1-10**

1 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

5 **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." 6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." 8 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." 9 Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house