

A reason to stop

Luke 19:1-10

November 3, 2013

Years ago, I was driving north on Route 17 through the woods of western Maine from Rumford to Rangeley. It was the first time I had ever driven that particular route. About ten miles from Rangeley, I climbed a hill, rounded a bend ... and almost drove off the road! Actually, I did drive off the road -- on purpose -- to stop and take in this view:



As I found out afterward, this spot is well-known and has its own name. It is called "Height of Land," and offers a magnificent view of Mooselookmeguntic Lake and the western Maine mountains. It is a good reason to stop!

Lynne and I shared a similar experience during my first trip to Scotland in the summer of 2009. It was our first full day in Scotland and we were driving west on A83 between Loch Lomond and Oban. We came to a turnout with a small parking area along the road, and we pulled off and stopped. There we enjoyed the view down this grand valley, with mists clinging to the sides of the mountains.





This place, too, has its own name. It is called "Rest and Be Thankful." Lynne and I did rest and we were thankful! It was a good good reason to stop!

There are other good reasons to stop. "Stop and smell the roses," they say. I found these roses in the Boston Public Garden. Roses are a good reason to stop.



The Supremes sang: "Stop in the name of love." Love is a good reason to stop!

Jesus stopped. Jesus stopped on his way through Jericho. Jericho is one of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world. People have been living on this site for 11,000 years. It is also one of the lowest cities in the world, situated 846 feet below sea level.



Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, located another twenty miles to the southwest, and it seems from the account in Luke's gospel that Jesus was intending merely to pass through the city, but he stopped. Did he stop for the scenery? Look at the photo. What do you think?

Jesus stopped for a man in a tree, a man perched in a sycamore tree.



The man was Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a Jew, one of the children of Abraham, one of Jesus' own people, but he was despised by his own people. Why? Because he was a tax collector, an employee of the occupying empire, an agent of the Roman government, collecting from his own people the monies

they were forced to pay to the state. They -- his own people, the Jews -- saw him as a collaborator, a traitor, a betrayer of his people.

And they despised him because he was rich, because he had what they didn't have. He came by his wealth in what was to them an unseemly way, but even so, wouldn't it be fair to say that they despised him too because they envied him?

Apparently, Zacchaeus had heard of Jesus, as had a lot of people. As Jesus passed through the city, a large crowd gathered around him. Zacchaeus wanted to get a look at him, but he was short and could not see anything from behind the crowds of people, so he ran ahead along the route Jesus was walking and climbed a tree. He climbed up into a sycamore tree, so he would be able to catch a good look at Jesus as he passed.

That's all he wanted, a good look, but Jesus stopped. Jesus stopped beneath the sycamore tree and called Zacchaeus by name and invited himself for dinner!

And Luke says that Zacchaeus hurried down and welcomed Jesus with joy. Why? What made Zacchaeus so happy? Well, who else ever welcomed him? Who else among his neighbors, his own people, ever asked to come to his house to share a meal with him? Being a tax collector for the Romans made for a profitable, but surely lonely, life. Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus because Jesus welcomed him. Zacchaeus was filled with joy, because Jesus stopped ... for him!

For Jesus, Zacchaeus was a good reason to stop. But Jesus was always stopping for people, wasn't he? He stopped for a Samaritan woman who came to the well where he sat resting. He stopped for a Pharisee who visited him at night. He stopped for an old, long sick woman who reached out from the crowd to touch the edge of his robe.

For Jesus, all kinds of people provided a good reason to stop. He stopped for a crazed man living among the caves along the shores of Lake Galilee. He stopped for a Canaanite woman begging mercy for her daughter. And he stopped for children.

Followers of Jesus stop for children, too, Did you see the story this week about the little boy who “stole the show” from Pope Francis? This little boy wanted to be near Francis, clinging to his robe, sitting in his chair, not leaving his side during the whole time Francis was speaking. It was a scene straight from the Bible, because while Francis was welcoming the boy and letting him be, several of his aides were doing their best to entice him away, even offering him candy!



Jesus stopped. Jesus stopped for Zacchaeus. And then Zacchaeus stopped. In the midst of the meal he was sharing in his home with Jesus, Zacchaeus stopped eating, stood up, and said to Jesus: “Listen! I will give half my belongings to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times as much.”



Photo: Diane Highnam

Zacchaeus stopped. He stopped his life, and changed direction! In one moment, he stopped where he was going, stopped what he was doing, turned his life around and headed off in a entirely new direction.

Because he had been a sinner? That's what everybody else called him, but did Jesus? Did Jesus call him a sinner? The only thing Jesus said was: "I want to come to your house today."

And listen again to what Zacchaeus said to Jesus: "If I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times as much." Zacchaeus implies that he has not consciously tried to cheat anyone, but if he has, perhaps unknowingly, he will make amends, many times over.

I never paid close attention to that line in this story before. The real issue, it seems, is not that Zacchaeus was a bad man, that he was robbing and cheating and taking advantage of people, his own people. No, Zacchaeus was just taking care of himself, taking care of himself by doing his job, taking care of himself by cooperating with the Romans, taking care of himself by making the best of a bad situation.

Isn't that what most of us do? We are not bad people. We don't go out and rob or cheat people. We are not notorious sinners. We just take care of ourselves. We do what we have to do to take care of ourselves. We just do our jobs.

But Zacchaeus stopped. He stopped just doing his job. He stopped just taking care of himself. He made a promise, he made a promise to Jesus, to start taking care of other people -- poor people, hurting people, people who had suffered unjustly. Zacchaeus made Jesus a promise to start living ... for them.

That's the real issue, not that Zacchaeus was a bad man, but that he was living for himself alone, and living for himself alone, left him ... alone. Jesus said: "Salvation has come to this house today!"

Salvation, because Zacchaeus is not alone anymore.

Salvation, because his life is not just about himself anymore.

Salvation, because he will be reconnected to his own people, through serving them.

Salvation, because the one who was lost is now found.

Salvation, because he stopped.

What made Zacchaeus stop?



What would make you stop? Zacchaeus stopped ... for Jesus. When Jesus welcomed him, valued him, loved him, Zacchaeus began to see himself through Jesus' eyes, and to realize that, as he was, living only for himself, he was lost. Zacchaeus didn't even know he was lost, until Jesus found him! And he never was saved, until he knew he was lost.

That's humility. Humility is acknowledging that by ourselves, on our own, we are lost. Humility is stopping, listening, paying attention, being ready to learn something new, being ready to change direction, being ready to follow someone else, being ready to follow Jesus.

Humility means giving up the struggle to make ourselves great. Humility means giving up the struggle to make ourselves at all. Humility means welcoming the gift of Jesus' welcome. Humility means welcoming the gift of Jesus' grace. Humility means welcoming the gift of the new way of life that Jesus offers. Humility means stopping ... for Jesus.

It's a good reason to stop!