

As you listen to God's word to us, please ask yourself— who am I in this story?

31 Jesus took the Twelve aside and said, "Look, we're going up to Jerusalem, and everything written about the Human One[a] by the prophets will be accomplished. 32 He will be handed over to the Gentiles. He will be ridiculed, mistreated, and spit on. 33 After torturing him, they will kill him. On the third day, he will rise up." 34 But the Twelve understood none of these words. The meaning of this message was hidden from them and they didn't grasp what he was saying.

35 As Jesus came to Jericho, a certain blind man was sitting beside the road begging. 36 When the man heard the crowd passing by, he asked what was happening. 37 They told him, "Jesus the Nazarene is passing by."

38 The blind man shouted, "Jesus, Son of David, show me mercy." 39 Those leading the procession scolded him, telling him to be quiet, but he shouted even louder, "Son of David, show me mercy."

40 Jesus stopped and called for the man to be brought to him. When he was present Jesus asked, 41 "What do you want me to do for you?"

He said, "Lord, I want to see."

42 Jesus said to him, "Receive your sight! Your faith has healed you." 43 At once he was able to see, and he began to follow Jesus, praising God. When all the people saw it, they praised God too.

19 Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. 2 A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." 6 So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus.

7 Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

8 Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much."

9 Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 The Human One came to seek and save the lost."

-Common English Bible

I had a conversation with a friend recently about the tricky nature of denial. How do you know what you don't know? It reminded me of a story I once heard someone share of an experience during check-in at an airport. The person behind the desk asked

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her if she was carrying anything she didn't know about. She thought for a moment and said, "Well, I don't know." Then the agent tried again, "I mean is there anything in your bags you don't know about." Again my friend said confidently, "I don't know." Then exasperated the agent said, "You know what I mean, are you carrying anything you don't know about?" The customer chuckled, "I really don't know."

There is so much we don't know. And we don't know what we don't know. Many things can be barriers to our knowing or seeing, such as-- lack of experiences and exposure, privileges and comforts, anxiety or grief, the basic limited character of human existence. According to Luke, Jesus spent weeks, maybe months trying to prepare his apostles and disciples for all that would go down in Jerusalem. Twice he explicitly tells them that he will be arrested, suffer, and be killed, and then be raised from the dead 3 days later. Another time he simply tells them that he will be "delivered into human hands." Every time he shares his fate with his inner circle, they absolutely cannot understand. The third prediction, in our reading today, is the most developed and explicit... but still they do not understand. They cannot see. Perhaps because Jesus is talking in the third person. Perhaps because of their expectations of what a Messiah would be. Perhaps because it all sounds impossible; they have no categories in their brains into which to sort the information. Perhaps because of their anxiety and grief. I don't know why. But I do know they didn't know. They just can't take this in. Even though they have direct teaching from Jesus... they can't understand. They can't see.

For on more week we ask ourselves, "Who am I?" Do you relate to struggles to see and understand- the teachings of Jesus? The experiences of others that are very different from your own? Our Anti-Racism groups this week used a "power flower" to try to see and understand the multi-faceted ways that privilege and power operate in our society. We noted the privileged/empowered group in a variety of categories— ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation, citizenship status, educational status, body types, age, ability, social class, family structure, religion, language— and then considered our identity in each of these categories. When we were identifying the empowered/privileged body type I had not considered height as a factor— but shorter members of our group were clear that indeed it is. This was a moment when that which I ordinarily

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do not see became visible to me. And more broadly this exercise revealed that in all categories except gender, I am aligned with privilege and power. I know this, but it's hard to know. Part of privilege is not needing to know. Often times those of us in privileged positions will deny the presence of race-based or gender-based or sexuality-based discrimination or oppression because we just can't see it. It is not negatively impacting us so we think it doesn't exist or it exists only in a few rare bad apples. We don't know what we don't know.

This week eight people, mostly Asian American women, were killed by a gunman in Georgia. The gunman says he committed this violence not on the basis of race, but on the basis of his sex addiction. He was trying to remove sources of temptation. But he targeted three Asian run businesses, passed by any number of other explicitly sexual businesses, and mostly killed poor, Asian American women. In the days that followed this horrific violence, Asian American women were speaking up about the ways they are hyper-sexualized and harassed by white men especially, on a regular basis. This wasn't only about race. But it was about race. As an article in the Washington Post put it, it is about race, and gender, and class... whether or not the shooter consciously knows that it was. We can know it if we listen to the honest witness of Asian Americans about oppression they experience on the basis of their race. It helps if we let the Spirit of Christ guide our listening to our others— because this is hard to do. We can struggle to see and understand.

In addition to the story of the disciples difficulty in understanding we have two other stories for our reflection today. First, Jesus is on the road to Jericho and when a blind man, begging along the side of the road, is told that the approaching crowd includes Jesus he starts yelling out for mercy. He identifies Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of David, even though he can't see him, he knows who he is. And he knows he can help him. The people leading the procession, probably those apostles who struggled to understand, scold him for shouting out— much as they scolded people who brought babies to Jesus for a blessing— but the blind man is undeterred. He shouts all the louder. And Jesus, Jesus who once told a story about one suffering on the side of a road to Jericho, listens and invites the blind man to come to him. He asks the blind man

what he wants from Jesus. And the blind man is clear that he wants to see. His disability was preventing him from making a living from any means other than begging... he was relegated to poverty... and he wants to see; he wants to be liberated; he wants mercy. And Jesus gives him what he wants... without even touching him. He restores his sight and commends the healing power of his faith. He becomes a disciple of Jesus, no longer begging alongside the road, but rejoicing and praising God as he follows Jesus.

So he's in the ever growing crowd accompanying Jesus when they arrive in Jericho. It's a thick crowd, so thick that a short man named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, a man made rich by oppressing and exploiting his Jewish kindred on behalf of the Roman Empire— this man also wanted to see. He wanted to see Jesus. So as anyone who has ever been to Sunday School will tell you, he climbed a sycamore tree to get a better view. This was not a dignified thing for an adult person of means to do. It's the sort of thing a child would do. But a crowd that made no room for him, and a strong desire, sent him scrambling up a tree. He wanted to see, but the amazing thing is that he is seen. Jesus sees him in the tree and calls him down, saying that he needs to stay in his house. Zachaeus is delighted. He can't wait to welcome Jesus. The crowd is disgusted. How could Jesus have fellowship with such a disgusting, oppressive person?

Zacchaeus is transformed by being seen— he promises to give half of his possessions to the poor, and to pay back anyone he has cheated, four times what he took from them. He is bearing the fruit of a changed heart and life, transformed from an oppressor of the poor to a servant of the poor. And Jesus is impressed. Though he just told his disciples that it will be easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle, than for a rich person to be saved... Zacchaeus is demonstrating that what is impossible for humans, is possible for God. When God incarnate saw him, honored him, welcomed him; it changed him.

At the end of our reading we heard Jesus once again affirm that his mission is to “seek and save the lost.” Everyone who is lost— whether poor and oppressed and begging on the side of a road, or rich and oppressive and hanging out in a tree... Salvation looks like restored sight and discipleship for the man previously blind.

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Salvation looks like the release of wealth for the benefit of poor neighbors for Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors. In oppressive systems, both oppressors and the oppressed are trapped, constrained, limited... cut off from full, joyful living. Jesus broke the bonds of oppression one person at a time, and in so doing he released people to joy. So ask yourself, "who am I? How am I caught up in oppressive systems in our society? With whom do I more closely identify in our stories today? What does salvation look like for me?" Ask yourself.

Maybe you aren't sure you need saving. Maybe you just don't know what you don't know. You just can't see what you can't see. But all of us are born into a condition of sin, and grow up in societies conditioned by sin— our love is distorted; we are caught up in oppressive systems not of our own design or even intention, and if these systems benefit us, we have a very hard time even knowing they exist. But Jesus is calling to us, making space for us, and is ready to grant us sight, to liberate us from oppression whether we are oppressed or oppressing or both or something in between. And when we experience this liberation we then joyfully follow Jesus by sharing his welcoming, saving, liberation with every lost person wherever we are blessed to find them.

So for one last time, ask yourself, "who am I?" And write an answer on a name tag to complete your Lenten collection.

Sources Cited in this Sermon In Addition to Scripture:

Monica Hesse. "It's race, class, and gender together': Why the Atlanta killings aren't just about one thing." *The Washington Post*, accessed on-line March 18, 2021. https://www.washingtonpost.com/lifestyle/style/hesse-atlanta-asian-women/2021/03/18/183b3f00-8749-11eb-8a8b-5cf82c3dffe4_story.html?utm_campaign=wp_post_most&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter&wpisrc=nl_most&carta-url=https%3A%2F%2Fs2.washingtonpost.com%2Fcar-ln-tr%2F30e7922%2F60537e3c9d2fda4c881135a2%2F5f264fca9bbc0f3a780ea2b7%2F8%2F70%2F60537e3c9d2fda4c881135a2

The opening story was shared with me by Eileen Lindner.

Join us for evening prayer on Zoom on Wednesday, 3.31.21 at 6:30 p.m, in the mist of holy week, with all your name tags or notes about your answers to the "Who am I?" question.