

Sermon (11/30/16, Luke 19: 1-10):

There's a commercial going around these days which I find surprisingly memorable. Perhaps, it's because it's reflective of the times, I'm not sure.

It begins with a young chef who is clearly being harshly reprimanded by a very demanding boss. We can't hear what he's saying but we don't have to. For some reason, she is being taken to task for the food she has made as he dumps it on the floor right in front of her. The scene is then followed by her rushing out the back of the restaurant, tossing her apron to the ground, putting the key in the ignition of her Toyota Corolla and zooming away.

All the while, playing in the background, is a song being sung by an artist named Grace. The song is entitled, 'You Don't Own Me'. As the song plays, the scene switches from the chef racing away in her Toyota to numerous other young people singing along with this song as they too seem to be racing away from something.

It turns out this is not a new song but has been done a number of times over the years. Lesley Gore was the first to sing it in 1963. As the title of the song suggests, it is filled with angry defiance.

'You don't own me. Don't try to change me in anyway. You don't own me. Don't tie me down because I will never stay. You Don't Own me. Don't tell me what to say and please, when I go out with you, don't put me on display. You Don't Own me.'

Now the item this commercial is trying to sell is a Toyota Corolla. Given the song and the story the commercial tells, I'm still trying to figure out how buying a Toyota Corolla gets one to the point of feeling like 'I'm free and living the life I want to live', as the song says? If anything, buying a car feels the direct opposite for me. Taking on a car loan I'll be trying to pay off for the next 2 dozen years only makes me feel like I'm owned all the more by

one more bank I owe money to.

‘You Don’t Own me.’ Whether it’s the bank you have that car loan with or the boss who missed that management class on how to care for their employees or something else, I’m thinking that few of us have not had our moments of wanting to sing a line from this song. ‘You Don’t Own me! I’m free and living the life I want to live.’

Well, let’s just say for a moment we were given that chance. To pick up and take off so we could live the life we want to live. What would that look like?

Let me make a confession. There’s a sign along Route 90 that is regularly updated with the latest jackpot amount for the Powerball lottery. Every now and again that amount gets so large that I just can’t stop myself from buying a ticket. I hand over the few dollars I have in my wallet, they punch some buttons on a machine, hand me a ticket, I neatly fold it up and gingerly put it in my wallet. Inevitably my mind then begins to fantasize. What would I do if I won? Of course, I’d cry a lot when they handed me that big check and then I’d probably tell them about the mortgage I’d pay off, the credit cards I’d get rid of, the loans I’d put to bed, the church I’d donate to, and the things I’d do for my children. The same things pretty much everyone says. In the background, they mine as well be playing... ‘You don’t own me anymore. I’m free and living the life I want to live. You don’t own me.’ Because that’s pretty much what my short term goal would be – to disentangle myself and those whom I love from all those things that tend to ‘own me.’

Well, all that fantasizing always comes to a screeching halt when I slip my ticket into that lottery bar code reader and it says, ‘Sorry, you’re a loser!’

What's interesting, however, is to read how high the statistics are of those who crash and burn after they do win the lottery. Once they get past all those things they initially said they would do, things seem to go downhill pretty quickly until, before long, they're in worse shape than they were before.

Of course, we'd all like to think we'd be the exception to the rule but would we? Is that wistful wish of 'not being owned' as easy to attain as we think it is? Is that desire to be 'free and living the life we want to live' really possible? What would that look like once we got past that initial shackle breaking spending spree? What would we do? What would occupy our days? In what would we invest ourselves? What would we focus our energies on? What would own us then?

Zacchaeus, by practically every measure we would use these days, comes across as one who has made it big. He has obtained that all too coveted desire to be beholden to practically no one. The text doesn't tell us if he drove a Toyota Corolla but, to be sure, it would appear he could easily sing this song... 'You Don't Own me'. If anything, just the opposite is true as scores of people owe him, taxes in this case.

Here's how the system worked. A businessman like Zacchaeus would make a bid with Rome to be a tax collector in a certain area. If he won that bid, he would agree to pay an agreed to amount to Rome which he would collect from the people in his designated area. In addition to collecting those taxes, he was free to tack on whatever amount he desired to keep for himself. The people he collected this money from would have no choice but to pay it or else they'd get a visit from, well, let's say, Rome's Goon Squad. As you might guess, tax collectors took full advantage of this system often becoming quite wealthy off the backs of many a

peasant family. Clearly, the corruption in the system ran rampant and we can easily understand why people loved to hate Tax Collectors like Zacchaeus.

Not only was Zacchaeus a tax collector but we're told he was a chief tax collector. He had worked his way up the ranks to achieve this lucrative status. He probably had a staff of tax-collectors to do the dirty work of making the collections while he sat back and enjoyed the proceeds. Life for Zacchaeus was an easy one – he probably lived in an elaborate home with the most modern of conveniences including maybe one or more Toyotas in his garage. He probably wore the finest clothes, ate the finest food, and was served by the finest servants. With the exception of needing to make sure Rome's bills were paid on time, which was probably pretty easy for him to do, Zacchaeus was living the life most of us long to live – unowned by anyone. 'He was free to live as he wanted to live', as the song goes. But was he?

Interestingly, we sense from this passage that Zacchaeus is not a happy person. Zacchaeus is not as free as we and others of his time would tend to think he was. Zacchaeus had not found the good life so many of us think this kind of success would bring.

It took a lot of courage to do what Zacchaeus did in today's passage – to leave the safety of his home to join a crowd where he would be easily recognized and immediately scorned, maybe even physically harmed. Clearly, the desire to, at least, catch a glimpse of this Jesus had to be very strong in Zacchaeus.

While the text doesn't give us much to go on, it's not a stretch for us to imagine the restlessness that plagued him. Something was severely wrong. The goal he had spent his life trying to achieve and now had wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. His life had a gaping, empty hole in it. Perhaps, Zacchaeus was tired

of being despised by the community around him. Perhaps, he had grown weary of being spit upon, cursed, and hated whenever he ventured out his front door. Perhaps his heart sank one too many times as mothers pulled their children aside as he passed by as if he had some deadly, contagious disease. Perhaps all that wealth and success he had worked so hard to achieve ended up only leaving him owned by emptiness and despair.

It had to be something big for Zacchaeus to take the kind of risk he took on the day Jesus came to town. It had to be something deep for him to endure and persist as people shoved and pushed him to the back of the line. It had to be something powerful to cause him to shimmy up that tree in all his fancy finery.

Well, most of us know how the rest of the story goes. Out of everyone who showed up that day, it was Zacchaeus who caught Jesus' eye. In fact, somehow Jesus even knew his name! And it ended up being Zacchaeus whom Jesus ate lunch with.

You can just imagine how angry that must have made everyone else. You can almost hear their grumbling. 'Well, there it is, once again it's the wealthy that get all the attention! Some things never change... even with Jesus.'

I wonder what they said when refund checks started showing up in their mail from Zacchaeus? In fact, not only refunds but refunds with interest, a very generous interest payment!

So stark and profound was this transformation in Zacchaeus, that the compensation Zacchaeus chose to pay for the unjust way he had treated people was significantly more than what was traditionally required and Zacchaeus did it all by choice not by some legalistic mandate. He even seemed happy to do it!

The thirst Zacchaeus had which led him to that hostile crowd that day was strong and deep. The satisfaction of what Zacchaeus

found in Jesus transformed all that Zacchaeus was.

All of this made me think of another song. This one was written by Bob Dylan. ‘You may be an ambassador to England or France.’ It says. ‘You may like to gamble, you might like to dance. You may be the heavyweight champion of the world. You may be a socialite with a long string of pearls. But you’re gonna have to serve somebody, yes indeed, you’re gonna have to serve somebody...’

Something incredible happened to Zacchaeus on that day he met Jesus. He had tried, in fact, lived his whole life pursuing the dream of not being owned by anybody but it was only when he opened himself to being owned by Jesus that he truly found the freedom he yearned for.

So maybe the song we sing makes a difference. Maybe it’s important to pick our music wisely. Maybe the question is not whether or not we are owned but *who* we are owned by. Maybe the freedom we seek is not so much found in a new Toyota Corolla as much as it is found in finding a good tree to shimmy up because, in the end, it’s not so much about what we find but about the One who finds us and calls us by name and invites us to come home for dinner.

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.

Congregational Prayers and Lord's Prayer:

Leader: The Lord be with you.

People: *And also with you.*

Leader: Let us pray...

Gracious and loving God, with grateful hearts we thank you for the way you search for us whether it be in the branches of trees, the messes we create, the despair we feel, or the traps we find ourselves in.

We are reminded this day of the inherent restlessness that seems to define our lives. While its intensity might wax and wane with the days, it's always there, in the background, nagging for attention. We are a discontent people living in discontent times. So we pray, this day, O God, for you to keep your eyes open for us. Please scan the branches of the trees we hide on. Please seek us out in the crowds we get lost in. Please look for us even when our eyes are searching elsewhere. Please pay attention to our desperation which often sends us scampering for hope even when we aren't quite sure what that hope looks like. Please search us out, O God. Please call our name and ask us to come down from the tangled branches we have gotten caught in. Please invite us to your table of bread and juice so that we might give our lives to you and finally know what it means to find the life we have so long searched for.

We pray all this knowing there are many here, even in this room today, who are feeling trapped and empty today. We know you know their names and we pray that they might hear you calling them.

We pray all this knowing there are many places in this

broken creation filled with the kind of desperation Zacchaeus had. People whose lives have been torn apart from violence, war, rejection, illness, and a kind of hurt no one should be forced to endure. Call their names, O God, and feed them with your love and healing. We pray all this knowing, O God, that there are few things that escape your sight, even these prayers we are so bold to now offer either in our silence or aloud...

We ask this all in Jesus' name who taught us to pray...

All: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread. And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.