

## Reformation/Homecoming Sunday

Wicker Park Lutheran church

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“He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on the account of the crowd he could not.”

(Luke 19:3) It sounds like this weekend in Wrigleyville! People want to see the Cubs.

They’ll pay hundreds of dollars to sit in a bar nearby; two-, four-, six-, eight- thousand-dollars to get in the stadium; and fifteen-, twenty-, thirty-thousand-dollars or more to sit in a dugout seat.

One of my colleagues was given a ticket to a playoff game. She admitted that she’s not really into sports, in fact not really a baseball fan, and she thought it might be a waste for her to go. Nevertheless, she went for the experience, and to say that she saw it.

I imagine that was how Zacchaeus felt too. As a chief tax collector he was an outsider, but he was intrigued. To see Jesus he had to climb a tree. In the tree he saw Jesus, and Jesus saw him. Jesus said, “Get down here, Zacchaeus. I’m coming over for dinner!”

Now, those gathered around Jesus grumbled. Most of them were probably Jewish, grumbling like their ancestors who wandered in the wilderness after the exodus. They grumbled because they deemed Zacchaeus a sinner. They grumbled because you would never have a meal with *that* kind of person. They grumbled because eating with someone indicated approval and acceptance, and they did not approve. So, they grumbled and grumbled.

In the midst of the grumbling, Zacchaeus spoke up. He said, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I *give* (present tense) to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything thing, I restore it (present tense) fourfold.” As a side note, some of the editors translate it as future tense, but the original Greek indicates present tense. That present tense brings a twist to the story. In present tense we discover that Zacchaeus is not terrible as the crowd thought. We *see* Zacchaeus for real – as a generous and benevolent almsgiver. Jesus said that although he’s labeled as an excluded sinner, he is actually God’s child and a son of Abraham. Jesus restored this lost child and expanded the family’s welcome.

This is a prominent theme in Luke’s gospel. From the beginning when the pregnant teenage Mary proclaimed that God turns everything upside-down, we heard that salvation is the divine living among us. Today salvation came to live in a tax collector’s home, of all places. In that unexpected location we found God working through this man - this short, rich, outsider. In Zacchaeus’s home we saw Immanuel, meaning God with us.

Back at the Cubs game my colleague also couldn’t see. In front of her were three tall men who stood the entire time. They also would high-five at literally everything. A strike – high five; a foul ball –high five; nachos – high five! My colleague didn’t get it. I get high fiving the nachos, but I’m not sure about the rest. Anyway, she couldn’t see the game. She grumbled and grumbled. As the game went on she felt herself swept into something new. With over 40,000 people gathered, cheering, and singing she became enveloped in the energy. In that mass of community she could feel God’s presence living in that place.

In today's gospel I wonder if the grumbling crowd responded in a similar way. I wonder what it was like when the crowd struck out because they missed God's presence. In this story, Jesus opens our eyes to salvation. He helps us remember that people are nuanced and that situations are not always as they seem. Here we're reminded that God's love isn't towards one ethnic group, or one profession, or one religion. Instead we're reminded that noticing and responding to God's presence is a way of being.

On this Reformation Sunday we remember Luther who literally hammered home that very point. Luther wanted the church to remember that faith along with Christly acts of love and service are never separated from real life. Luther wanted to make God more accessible. He wanted to open the eyes of the church, to expand its reach, to welcome the outsider, and to preach the good news of God's love. Luther wanted to reform, renew, and rekindle the church. This is something the church *must* do over and over and over again.

In her book "The Great Emergence," Phyllis Tickle notes that "every 500 years the church goes through a rummage sale and cleans out the old forms of spirituality and replaces it with new ones. This does *not* mean that previous forms become obsolete or invalid. It simply means they lose *pride of place* as the dominant form of Christianity. [We saw this with] Constantine in the late 4th century, early 5th, the Great Schism of the 11th century, the Reformation in the 16th century, and now the Postmodern era in the 21st century." Right now, Phyllis argues, we are in the midst of "The Great Emergence" of the church into something new.<sup>1</sup> It's an exciting time to be church, and it's scary too.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://vialogue.wordpress.com/2008/04/27/the-great-emergence-phyllis-tickles-500-year-rummage-sale/>

It's scary because we like things to stay the same. We grumble about change. We grumble about the work needed to change. We grumble about losing what we've come to identify as church. Like the crowd in today's gospel, we miss the point in our grumbling. Jesus's point is that we are called to expand our welcome. The point is to identify and acknowledge God's presence in all people. The point is to be transformed by God's love so that loving our neighbor becomes habit. Religious communities *are* places to challenge us, train us, empower us, and nurture us, so that when we walk out those doors we are equipped to intrinsically love our neighbor, so that we're skilled to care for the environment as God's creation, and so that we put into practice the life-giving grace and love that we receive from our God.

With that in mind, I wonder: in the months, years, and generations ahead what will the church look like? I'm not sure. What do *you* think it will look like? In your bulletin you'll find a small post-in note. I invite you to take a moment and write what you hope the church of the future will look like. Where do we need to reform? Where do we need to restore? Where can we better respond and connect? Take a moment to write.

Now take a moment to meet someone new and share.

After worship on the way to the annual picture or after communion I invite you post this thesis, or talking point, on the wooden doors in the back, much like Martin Luther did. When you come back in from the picture, read through them and see the hopes and the dreams for our church.

One thing you'll see on my post-in note is the "celebration of common table fellowship." My prayer is that Lutherans and Roman Catholics can gather at the table of

Holy Communion to celebrate God's presence. For over 50 years we've been in dialogues with each other, and we're on our way! Tomorrow, on Reformation Day, Pope Francis will gather with leaders of the Lutheran World Federation for a prayer service. This will be the first time that Lutherans and Catholics celebrate the anniversary together on a global level. I hope one day we can gather at this table together. I hope that we can find Catholics and Lutherans, republicans and democrats, straight and queer, old and young, Jewish and tax collector, Cubs fans and baseball illiterates all gathered at this table. We'll gather here for a holy meal, a meal like the one Jesus shares with Zacchaeus, a meal of acceptance and understanding, a meal of grace and faith, a meal that will remind us that salvation has indeed come to this house.

So there it is. The gift of Zacchaeus, the gift of the reformation, and the gift of this faith community is to challenge us to see something new. We as people of faith encounter Christ and we are transformed. We are transformed so that, like Zacchaeus, our faith becomes habit, our love becomes both contextual and customary, so that our response to God's love and grace becomes life-giving for all. Thanks be to God for the gift of our continued reformation! Amen.