

## 26C 2022

Jesus lived out of a set of values very different from most people in his day and from most people in ours.

Because of this, he was rarely not shocking people.

In a world where people took care of themselves and their own, in a world where Jews in particular separated themselves from others by the fabric they wore, the food they ate, the rituals they practiced, and the company they kept, he taught that we are to build relationships with our neighbors.

He intentionally went out to the lands of the gentiles and healed people to demonstrate that we must reach beyond the barriers we set up.

In the story about the samaritan in a ditch, he taught that the one whom we help is our neighbor—we are to make neighbors of others.

Jesus was countering the Roman, Greek, and Jewish cultures that taught people what constituted an admirable person.

Each culture puts certain people on top.

In our culture, we call them influencers, billionaires, stars.

Because of the twenty-four-hour news cycle, social media, and the multiple ways that images now reach us, we are more aware than ever of who is considered successful, wise, beautiful.

Occasionally, someone pulls the curtain back on one of these people and we find out that he or she was human after all.

When this happens, we protest how shocked we are and make an example of them for not being more careful about hiding their humanity because, ultimately, they risk revealing how little our culture actually has to do with true virtue and wisdom.

In the process, we become experts at hiding hurt, loneliness, emptiness.

One set of four young men were enjoying YouTube fame as the Try Guys.

They would try extra-hot peppers or play a chessmaster or make a pie without a recipe and film the results.

One of the four was caught having an extramarital, intra-studio affair, and they kicked him out of the group in a very public shaming.

It was not about their high moral values, I suspect, but about their awareness that their audience is between 70 and 80 percent female, mostly between 13 and 25, that persuaded them to act in this manner.<sup>1</sup>

If they lose the audience, they lose the money.

I am not in favor of adultery, but I also am not in favor of what one commentator called Stalinesque<sup>2</sup> tactics.

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1 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/25/magazine/try-guys-internet-fame.html?searchResultPosition=1>

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The situation could have been handled with more sensitivity and caring had they been bound together by love rather than money.

They could have quietly retired him and privately encouraged him to reconsider his behavior.

Instead, they announced his infidelity to the world and excised his image from any of their prior videos.

In the search for something to replace relationship, we are perpetuating inhuman standards for ourselves which leads to loneliness and alienation.

Our youth now report high levels of insecurity about their bodies because they do not look like the people they see in the media, people who start with a certain genetic advantage and spend much of their time maximizing it.<sup>3</sup>

In the countryside around Sewanee Seminary, a friend of mine reported meeting young men who refused to work more than part time so that they would have more time in the gym.

Zacchaeus was just such a lonely, alienated person.

He was a man of small stature, not like the ones others admired.

He compensated by seeking to be superior in other ways.

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3 <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/31/learning/what-students-are-saying-about-how-social-media-affects-their-body-image.html>

He became a chief tax collector.

That is, he worked for the Roman occupation.

He worked so hard for them that he rose in the ranks.

He grew wealthy by turning his back on the society that had made him feel inadequate.

He was surely a man hated by his own people.

Zacchaeus probably told himself he did not care.

He was better than they were, richer.

But these lies that we tell ourselves are like closing our eyes against the cold.

It must have been this existential shiver that led Zacchaeus to find Jesus interesting.

When Jesus was passing through, Zacchaeus climbed up a tree to see him.

It was a position with which he was familiar.

He literally was going to look down on Jesus as he passed by, but not interact with him.

Jesus, on the other hand, had a soft spot for those who were hated, for those who were outsiders, for those who were lonely.

He recognized them as his brothers and sisters.

When he spotted Zacchaeus looking down on him from the tree, Jesus looked beyond his wealth and position.

He saw the loneliness, the hurt and wanted to heal him.

He told Zacchaeus to come down from the heights to which he had lifted himself and speak with him face to face.

Come down from that tree, come down from your pedestal, come down from your illusion and admit that you need other people.

Building relationships is the heart of healing, the heart of ministry.

I just returned from the diocesan clergy conference where our own bishop and the bishop of Georgia spoke about their experience at the Lambeth Conference, where Anglican bishops from all over the world met in Canterbury.

There were, as always, powerful disagreements, particularly about sexuality.

Despite that, what they came away with was a sense that the most important work at Lambeth was not agreeing on everything, but building real relationships with people.

I came away from clergy conference with the same sense.

The specific topic addressed was not the most significant aspect of the conference, but the relationships that were strengthened and built.

Of course, when Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house, there were many who grumbled.

They were more concerned about making distinctions than about building relationships.

“He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”

Well yes. Any house is the house of a sinner.

They were interested in social hierarchy and power and resented Zacchaeus.

The politics of resentment is a powerful tool for controlling people.

Turning people against one another makes them much easier to control—divide and conquer.

Jesus, on the other hand, is about uniting and loving.

The gospel is not about agreeing, but about building meaningful relationships.

People sometimes tell me that we don’t need God to do that, but that is not my experience of the world.

They must have different HOAs from me.

They must have gone to different schools, have dealt with different businesses, because love was not the focus in much of my dealings with others.

For the most part, the best I got was a perfunctory, “Welcome to Walgreens,” now take our customer satisfaction survey.

The church is the only place I have found that was dedicated to love.

Notice that in making Zacchaeus a neighbor, Jesus did not attempt to persuade Zacchaeus to change jobs.

He did not teach him a creed.

He ate with him, built trust with him.

He invited him down to lift him up.

Jesus took a risk.

Zacchaeus might not have come down, or he might have come down, but continued to look down on Jesus, anyway.

Instead, Zacchaeus responds to Jesus' overture by having a change of heart, repentance, *metanoia*.

He says, "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."

Jesus recognizes that Zacchaeus is now beginning to heal, is now on the salvation path of honesty and humility rather than the path of self-deception and superiority.

Each person we meet is an opportunity, not to get them to agree with us, but to build trust and relationship.

I do not agree much politically or even theologically with some of my favorite people.

What we do agree on is the importance of trust and relationship.

It starts when we are honest with ourselves, when we ask ourselves, do we have more in common with Jesus, or Zacchaeus?