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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw
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Lectionary Year C: Luke 19:1-10

A person's outward characteristics are often used to identify and even make judgments about that person. Appearance, voice, demeanor, or personal hygiene habits can all be a part of our description of another person. Take something as basic as a way someone speaks. What does that say to us. Surely, the Hoo-sier twang says Indiana, the sing-songy Nordic brogue says Minnesota, the "hoser in a tuque" says Canada, the syrupy Southern drawl says Georgia, and the streetwise and tough dialects of Tony Danza and Tony Fauci say Bensonhurst, Brooklyn. And often, when we're looking for that magical place in America where there's allegedly "no accent," linguistics experts can identify some indefinite point in Nebraska, which isn't too far off -- particularly when considering how late-night TV legend Johnny Carson (of Norfolk, Nebraska) spoke or how retired NBC Nightly News anchor Tom Brokaw (of "almost" Nebraska -- Yankton, South Dakota) speaks. Media personalities, especially, aren't supposed to sound like they're from anywhere, lest others make assumptions about their intelligence, education, or qualifications for their jobs.

For decades, entire educational programs devoted to "accent reduction" have promised to take people who sound like they're from somewhere and make them sound like they're from nowhere. This has long been at least a tacit requirement of those seeking careers in radio or television broadcasting, as I suggested earlier. The unfortunate side-effects of this might include a loss of regional "flavors" across our nation, resulting in a bland, homogenous uniform-

ity of not only language but also culture across our nation. I, for one, hope that our regional "accents" (I use this term loosely) never disappear completely.

And if people are making judgments about others based on some outward characteristic, it isn't the characteristic's fault, nor is it the fault of the person who possesses it. Rather, it's simply a matter of prejudice or bias. Does one or more of a person's outward characteristics negatively or positively skew our perception of that person, and, if so, why?

I find it remarkable that a man's short stature was a detail demanding inclusion in Luke's Gospel. But had this detail been omitted, none of us would've sang choruses of "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he" in Sunday School, so there's that, I suppose. There's also the so-called "Napoleon complex," which associates aggressive and temperamental behavior to persons of short stature; nowadays, it is considered to be a derogatory stereotype and has been debunked by at least two noteworthy studies. But Zacchaeus may not have drawn disdain from the public on the basis of his height; indeed, as tax collectors have made their way into our Gospel texts of late, it instead is his occupation that causes people to grumble. As this part of the Mediterranean world was occupied by the Roman Empire, observant Jews (like the Pharisees, for example) would've seen tax collectors as agents of the enemy. Zacchaeus, in particular, would've fit a fairly typical profile -- except for his height -- of a tax collector, which would've included not only receiving funds for the Roman treasury but also taking a little extra for himself to live on. This padding of the pocket would explain why tax collectors are so closely associated with thieves in the Gospels.

Jesus' response, though, to this apparent thief is unexpected. Not only does Jesus request a visit to Zacchaeus' house, he also passes no judgment upon him for what he has done, even as bystanders note, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner" (Luke 19:7b). But Jesus' approach works, and obviously works much better than judging Zacchaeus. Without any apparent prompting, apart from the presence of Jesus himself, Zacchaeus declares, "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" (Luke 19:8). This is what Jesus is able to bring out of people; he brings out transformation of hearts and minds, which then transforms the actions of people into good, just, and restorative actions not unlike those that Zacchaeus proposes.

Jesus' mission, in light of what happens in Zacchaeus, is therefore clear; he says, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10). With Zacchaeus, it's mission accomplished. He "gets it," in spite of many of his contemporaries not "getting it." And he "gets it" without requiring a bunch of browbeating from Jesus. This is something that, perhaps, we need to remember during this season of stewardship emphasis, as there may already be a number of individuals among us whose encounter with the Lord has so transformed their hearts and minds that they gladly put forth a Zacchaeus-like commitment to the church. Lofty as that might sound, it's worth a shot!

Think, then, how wonderful it would be to not have to harangue people to pledge, and to know that the giving is unconditional and out of the goodness of one's own heart. On a personal note, that is one area in particular where my parents were excellent role models to me; they showed me a level of spiritual maturity that put the church's ministry ahead of any need for recognition or

impulse to micromanage the stewardship dollars that they offered. Looking back, I'd like to think that no browbeating was necessary with them, either.

Although, I can remember either Mom or Dad saying, as their offering envelope awaited them on the kitchen table before leaving for church, "Remember the dues!" (Of course, their use of the word "dues" was purely tongue-in-cheek!)

A yearly pledge is a leap of faith, in some respects. It reflects not only a trust in the church as a whole but also a trust that God will continue to work in and through the church's ministries. And the church's ministries are where the Holy Spirit can make the church grow, by igniting the time and talent of members old and young and everyone in between. From a financial standpoint, a pledge is all the church needs. But then, there's everything beyond finances, and that's where time and talent enter the picture. I have some good news for you, though, and I'll put it in terms of a quote attributed to Woody Allen: "Ninety percent of success in life is just showing up." In the church, that's especially true, because ninety percent of what is done around here is stuff you can already do, and if you think you can't do the other ten percent, there's always training available. Therefore, all you have to do is show up and say, "I'm here," and somebody will direct you to an appropriate use of your time and talent. At St. Anne's, we even have a Ministries Guide for that exact purpose!

And may you thereby witness the Holy Spirit at work, igniting our time and talent and guiding us to where we need to be...

But if you're not feeling quite up to that -- fear not! God is always at work transforming hearts, minds, and souls...from the time of Zacchaeus (and before)

right up to today. And if that transformation doesn't happen now or in quite the way you'd expect, it will surely happen when our Lord returns to raise us up on the last day. In the meantime, God can change the "accent" -- not in terms of Hoosier twang or Nordic brogue but instead in the way we think -- and gradually bring out those accents that give, love, and serve unconditionally and without need for recognition. In the end, it doesn't matter how we sound, look, or seem...but only how we see, think, and respond. God might not have our outward characteristics licked (at least to our liking), but he sure has our inward substance right in the pocket. And that's what matters...

Thanks be to God!

Amen.