

The Bethel Pulpit

Pastor John Swanson

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BETHEL

LUTHERAN CHURCH

On the web at www.bethel-madison.org

312 Wisconsin Ave, Madison WI 53703

Text: Luke 19:1-10

May grace and peace be yours in abundance, in the knowledge of God and of Jesus Christ our Lord. I want to tell you about this past my Monday.

1. UW Hospital – Zack Holmes

On my way in to work, I stopped at UW Hospital to visit someone from our Bethel family who had been in a very dangerous car/motorcycle accident this past weekend.

2. Caleb's friend killed

A few hours after that visit, when I was sitting at my desk in my office, I got a text from my son, Caleb. He told me that he just heard that an acquaintance of his – a boy his age (17) – was shot dead in his home on Sunday night.

3. Sympathy Card from Bethel member

Monday was also the day I got a card in the mail from one of you folks. The card was a beautiful sympathy card that was responding to a recent Bethelite article that I wrote about the death of one of my dogs – Raven.

4. Help woman and kids

Monday afternoon I was invited into a conversation with a woman who had two small children and had stopped in at the front desk here at Bethel and had shared with Jeff (Bethel's receptionist) that she needed some help. She and I talked and it was clear that she and her children were going through a really tough time. So fortunately, thanks to the offerings, the tithes and the gifts from all of you folks, I – we – were able to provide a bit of compassionate support.

5. Call to visit elderly Mom at UW

Sometime after that, Jeff got a call from the son of a Bethel member. He was telling Jeff that his elderly Mom was at UW Hospital and was hoping someone could visit. Jeff shared the information with me and I head to the hospital. (Plug calling Bethel if you know a Bethel person is hospitalized and might appreciate a visit.) I walked into the hospital room of this little lady in her early 90s sound asleep and surrounded by her loving family; a family who had just received

from their mom's/grandmother's/wife's doctor the news that no family wants to hear – there is nothing more that we can do.

After I left the hospital, I headed home. When I got to a stoplight, I noticed that my emotions were kind of heightened (EMO) – I didn't necessarily feel burdened from the day, but I definitely felt impacted by it. What struck me was the many ways that grief – personal grief – enters into our lives.

I guess I should make one thing clear. When I speak of personal grief, I am not simply thinking about the grief we experience when we lose a loved one through death. That is clearly one way – one powerful way – that we experience personal grief, but it is not the only way.

Personal grief is caused by many things – we may deal with it when we lose a job, when we are told that we cannot drive anymore because of our age, when we move from our home, sell our home, when we experience a relationship change or break up, can't do all the things we used to do, fail a class. The list goes on and on. Personal grief enters into our lives in many shapes and sizes (in many ways and magnitudes), but one thing seems to be a constant – whether we were prepared for the loss at some level or whether we were completely surprised by it – when grief begins to infect our lives, we begin to break down and we need help.

As I continued home on Monday, I thought about the story of Zacchaeus, which I had picked for our gospel for today. It is a beautiful story about hope and love, redemption and re-birth.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector in Jericho and it appears from the context of the story that he did well for himself – at the expense of all those other folks in Jericho. Folks who made it very clear that they did not like him or think that Jesus should spend any time with him, let alone be a guest in his house.

It is safe to say that Zacchaeus was not liked by his neighbors. He and his fellow tax collectors were collecting taxes from their Jewish brothers and sisters and giving them to the Roman occupiers (to

the enemy!), and many of these tax collectors were also skimming off the top for their own gain. Yet, I have to say I am a bit sympathetic when it comes to Zacchaeus. And I am, for an odd reason – I remember a song I sang in children's choir at Grace Lutheran Church in Des Moines. The song was, "Zacchaeus Was a Wee Little Man" and I had a solo.

Zacchaeus was a wee little man
And a wee little man was he
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see

And when the Savior passed that way

He looked up in the tree

And said, "Zacchaeus, you come down! (My solo
line!)

For I'm going to your house today!
For I'm going to your house today!"

Zacchaeus was a wee little man
But a happy man was he
For he had seen the Lord that day
And a happy man was he;
And a very happy man was he.

I do not know all that troubled Zacchaeus. As a boy, I remember thinking about that song and practicing all the hand motions like climbing (climbing action) into a sycamore tree and looking for Jesus (looking action), and I also remember the felt figures my Sunday School teacher used and I remember Zacchaeus – more than looking little, he looked sad. So, I wondered about Zacchaeus. Why was he sad and why did this wee little man want to see Jesus so much – what was going on in his life that would make him climbing a tree?

As a kid, I understood tree climbing etiquette and protocol as good as the next kid. I knew, for example, that an adult climbing a tree was kind of a weird and unusual thing – so I figured that something pretty serious had to have been bothering Zacchaeus for him to want to climb a tree. As an adult when I think about what might have been bothering Zacchaeus – what drove him up that tree – I would suggest that it was grief. Zacchaeus grieved the life that he had – a life that was filled with money and power, but void of any true community or joy. Zacchaeus felt a separation from his community and from God and in Jesus he saw

hope for change.

Grief may seem like our enemy. I know I do not look forward to grieving. I certainly have never said anything like, "Boy I haven't grieved in weeks – I really miss it. Hopefully I have a "grief moment" soon!"

We do not like it, but we all grieve. We all face sadness, we all face difficulty, loss, brokenness, failure; we all grieve and we are all going to continue to grieve as we journey into the future. Grief cannot be avoided – it is not the enemy. Instead, the enemy is burying our grief – internalizing it or pretending that it is not there. When we do that we begin to lash out and act out and say all sorts of things we wish we hadn't and know we shouldn't.

Zacchaeus had lived that life long enough. He was hungry for some kind of change, so he climbed up that sycamore tree. And when he heard Jesus' invitation – Jesus' radical welcome – he climbed down that tree to experience love and hope in a way he had never experienced it before.

Jesus' radical invitation opened the door for growth and re-birth in Zacchaeus and that invitation/that welcome opens the door for growth and re-birth within us as well.

On June 2nd I preached at the Bethel Horizons Congregational Picnic and I talked about a controlled burn that had recently taken place on Seminole Highway on the west side of Madison. I had asked a photographer friend to go out to the field with me about a week after the burn to take some pictures. What we were looking for in the midst of that blackened and burned field were little shots of plants – and we found them everywhere. Despite the fact that a fire had raged right there days before, these little sprouts were exploding from the ground.

I pass that field at least once a week even now and I look at that field – it is a mass of wild flowers and wild grasses (and yes, a few weeds). And it is beautiful!

The fires of grief that rage in our lives can be absolutely brutal – some seem almost insurmountable. But there is re-birth. Sprouts can come up in our lives in the midst of the cruellest moments of grief and sadness, and those sprouts – almost despite us – can somehow bear wonderful fruit. That is true hope and love. And when others come to us in our grief and offer support and when we do that for others in the midst of their grief –

sprouts of hope and love emerge.

Our journey in life may at times seem simply like a journey of grief, we can feel so overwhelmed. But Jesus' promise of hope and love sprout into our lives in surprising and amazing ways and re-birth can and does happen.

As I pulled into my driveway on Monday, I thought about all the people I had interacted with throughout the day. Grief had touched their lives in a variety of ways. And some of them would be dealing with that grief for a long time. There is nothing good about that. But in the midst of that grief – in the midst of all those horrible experience – there is hope for re-birth. May we who grieve do it well and be blessed with the sprouts of God's hope and love. Amen.