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“Small Speaks to Small”
A sermon by Marilyn T. Hedgpeth

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time / Reformation Sunday (Year C)
October 30, 2016

Genesis 18:1-10a; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10

Because he was small, Luke says,

and because the crowd was large and obscuring his view,

Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see for himself who this Jesus was.

Zacchaeus put himself out on a limb (pun intended, Vern!)

to be as close as possible to Jesus in order to perceive with his own senses
this purported Holy One, this Word made flesh.

Perhaps Zacchaeus, whose name in Hebrew means “upright” or “righteous,”

knew in his heart of hearts that transformation and reformation
result from proximity to the holy

in whatever way, shape or form that takes.

Zacchaeus may have been small in stature,

but he certainly was not small in accomplishment.

He was a *chief* tax collector, a Jewish businessman

with wide financial connections in the larger Roman world.

Zacchaeus may have been small in stature,

but he was not small in fortune: he was *rich*, Luke tells us.

He had done quite well for himself, working for the occupying Roman government.

Zacchaeus may have been small in stature,

but we have no indication that he was small in heart,

like the Grinch who stole Christmas.
His name, meaning “upright” and “righteous,”
does not necessarily indicate any corruption or abuse of power on his part.
However, according to the large crowd’s reaction to him,
Zacchaeus was small in reputation and respect
because of the Jewish people’s stereotypical characterization of **all** tax collectors
as traitors, opportunists, book-cookers, and cheats.
Nevertheless, at least one Jew, Jesus, looks up to Zacchaeus non-judgmentally,
finds him sitting in the tree, is drawn to him, and invites himself
right into Zacchaeus’ home and life.

Zacchaeus reacts to Jesus *immediately* with enthusiasm, warmth, and energy:
running, climbing, making haste, hurrying down,
welcoming, and rejoicing in his presence.
In the narrative from Genesis 18 about Abraham’s galvanized hospitality
towards his three holy guests (also in the presence of trees),
we find a prototype for Zacchaeus’ energetic response to the holy.
He reacts to Jesus by rectifying his own business practices
right before his guest’s eyes as an act of honor or homage.
Maybe from this moment on, Zacchaeus will be *a small seed of reformation*
planted in the culture of tax fraud so prevalent in that day. Who knows?

But we, in the 21st century, know Zacchaeus best, perhaps,
as the tiny, tiny man of the song we learned when we were tiny, tiny ourselves.
Small speaks to small across the centuries
because everyone knows how it feels to be small in power,
cognizant of seeing and hearing changes that need to be made around us,
to align ourselves and our community with God’s kingdom values,
but feeling relatively powerless to make those needed reforms.
Mother Teresa, recently canonized as a saint in the Catholic Church,

once said of her daunting call to minister among the poorest of the poor
in Calcutta, India,

*"We can do not great things, **only small things with great love.***

*What is important is not how much you do, but how much love you put
into doing it."* (I love that, don't you?)

(Claiborn, Shane, Wilson-Hartgrove, Jonathan, Okoro, Enuma. *Common Prayer*.
Zonderan, 2010, p. 436)

This day has been designated Reformation Sunday by the Protestant Church:
a time to commemorate the huge ecclesial reforms that swept through Europe
during the sixteenth century, mainly,
transforming and reviving the church from nation to nation.
And next year at this time, the world will celebrate largely
the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation,
which gained footing and followers after the defiant act of the monk, Martin Luther,
who nailed his 95 theses challenging the power
of the Holy Roman Church to the door of the Wittenberg Cathedral
in Germany on October 31, 1517.

But the Protestant Reformation did not begin
with that first blow of the hammer on that particular cathedral door
or with that first strike of the clock at midnight on October 31, 1517.

There were pre-reformers, as you know, *who did small things with great love,*
and at great cost, to prepare the way for vast ecclesial change.

The one I want to mention, the one I know best as a cradle-roll Moravian,
is Jon Huss, a Czech priest of very humble, small beginnings,
whose name Huss, means "goose" in his native tongue.

Born poor to peasant parents, Huss became a priest to escape poverty
and to secure a good livelihood for himself.

He was appointed to be the preacher at Prague's Bethlehem Church,
a progressive church which encouraged him to preach in Czech

and not in Latin, 100 years prior to the Protestant Reformation
(you can see where this is leading).

But in his preaching, and in his study and teaching,

a change, a reformation, came over Huss himself:

he experienced holy proximity when *he fell in love with the Word,*

much as Zacchaeus experienced holy proximity through an encounter
with the Word made flesh, Jesus.

Inspired by the writings of John Wycliffe,

Huss began to trust the power of Scripture alone, *sola scriptura,*

"desiring to hold, believe, and assert whatever is contained in them,

as long as I have breath in me," he said.

(www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/John-huss.html, August 2008)

And across the centuries, small spoke to small,

as Huss' leaning toward the power of Scripture made him

cognizant and wary of huge corrupt practices around him

of The Holy Roman Church and of The State,

and especially of The Church in collusion with The State to exploit the people.

When Huss spoke out and acted out with enthusiasm, warmth and energy,

much like Zacchaeus, he was excommunicated

and forbidden to preach or minister at the Bethlehem church.

And when he leaned even more heavily on the Bible, on the Scriptures that he loved,

which he claimed to be the final authority for The Church,

and when he made the *outlandish claim* that "Christ alone is head of The Church,"

Huss was summoned before the Holy Roman Emperor to come and give account

of his heretical doctrine before the Council of Constance.

He *was promised, assured* safe conduct to Germany by the Church,

but upon arrival, Huss was arrested immediately, imprisoned,

and mandated to recant his views.

Realizing that he would not be granted a forum to explain his views

or a fair hearing, he said, *"I appeal to Jesus Christ, the only judge*

who is almighty and completely just.

In his hands I plead my cause, not only on the basis

of false witnesses and erring councils, but on truth and justice.”

(www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/John-huss.html, August 2008)

Consequently, on July 6, 1415, one hundred and two years before

the tipping point of The Protestant Reformation,

Huss was dressed in his priestly garments, then stripped of them one by one,

each time he refused to recant.

He was burned at the stake that same day, reciting the Psalms as flames engulfed him.

His executioners tossed his ashes into a lake, so nothing would remain of this heretic.

Nothing would remain: not one small bit of evidence.

Yet, something did remain, as small spoke to small across the centuries:

a tiny, tiny seed of reform remained; a smoldering ember remained.

Small people of insignificance are noticed, engaged,

and invited to share a meal or a cup of tea.

Small people go up against great powers.

Smallest of all mustard seeds

grow up into the greatest of all trees with room for all birds to nest.

Small seeds of change are planted, and systems and institutions are dislodged.

Small things are done with great love.

What is important is not how much we do,

but how much love we put into doing it.

Encounters with the Word made flesh, or brushes with God's Word

inspire transformation and reformation, it seems.

And holy proximity begets courage to live into the latent potential that God

has enfolded into your DNA and mine as a genetic inclination

to rankle, to speak out, to protest, and to whistle-blow,

when the world does not align with God's kingdom values.

An athletics literacy counselor at UNC-Chapel Hill

is vilified for exposing an 18-year history of academic fraud and cheating.

Small speaks to small.

A female lawyer at the center of the bellwether Flint, MI, water crisis

is found shot to death in her apartment last April.

Small speaks to small.

A young woman goes public and reveals her identity

in order to bring light to a culture of sexual assault at a local university.

Small speaks to small.

A professional football player takes a knee during the National Anthem.

Small speaks to small.

What motivates these people to address great powers so courageously?

What drives these people to risk stepping out on a limb,

even when they know that it is highly possible that they might get burned?

What inspired Zacchaeus to respond so positively to Jesus, the Holy One,

the Word made flesh, and to seek reform in his own life and lifestyle?

Today is Reformation Sunday,

and *today*, salvation has come to *this house*, Jesus says,

as he sips tea with an ordinary tree-hugger.

How is small speaking to small across the centuries to you,

and how are you being called to respond to this holy awareness:

one small signature on a petition that denounces hate;

one small *positive* tweet;

one small refusal to move to the back of the bus;

one small friendship across lines of differentiation;

one small act of solidarity to show that black lives do matter to you;

one small donation to a cause that begets blessing to *everyone*;

one small soul to the polls; one small vote;

one small letter to an editor, or to an elected official;

one small hour of volunteering?

How are we protesting Protestants being called and equipped today, this day,

to respond in small ways with great love and great courage

to the places and situations where we sense

the need for true reform befitting God's dream for all creation? Amen.