

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

# BE LIKE DANNY DEVITO

A sermon preached the 30th of October 2016, the 24th Sunday after Pentecost, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Luke 19: 1 – 10.

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Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "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." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

— Luke 19: 1 – 10

Jericho is old, the world's oldest continuously inhabited city. Thebes, Athens, Kirkuk, Jerusalem, Aleppo, and the second-oldest Byblos, inhabited since 5,000 BC: they're all upstarts by comparison. People have lived in Jericho since 9,000 BC.

The first time someone named Yeshua came through Jericho, he burned the city down and threatened curses on anyone who would rebuild it. That happened just the other day, in the thirteenth century BC. You can read about it in the sixth chapter of the Book of Joshua.

It isn't nice to destroy things, we figure. I want to tell you three things about that way of figuring. First: That we don't want our heroes destroying stuff makes our picture of God low-definition. We put up in our piety with what we don't want in our iPads and televisions. People who review displays refer to "black levels". The intensity of the color black that a screen can produce is important to its quality, its ability to display detail. As with flat panels so with biblical interpretation. We miss much of what's there in the Bible not because it lacks capacity to display it — the Bible has a high contrast ratio — but because we don't want to see it. *Creator. Redeemer. Sustainer.* These we have eyes for, an appetite. God as *Destroyer*? Not so much.

Second: Being nice is overrated.

Third: Open your eyes. In your reading of scripture, do what you do in the hardware store. Look around. If you put yourselves in Joshua's place you'd see in Jericho a

Canaanite culture that was a snake pit of sacred prostitution and child sacrifice.

One of those prostitutes was Rahab. Her career was destroyed when she converted to Yahweh and was incorporated into Israel. Her story [Joshua 2] goes like this. Joshua sent a forward reconnaissance unit into Jericho and the spies went into the red light district where Rahab took them in. When the King of Jericho found out they were there, he demanded she give them up. One of my teachers, Frederick Buechner, in his book *Peculiar Treasures*, writes about it.

Rahab replied that though it was true some customers answering his description had been there that evening, she'd thought they were just a couple of butter-and-egg men out for a good time and had kissed them goodbye not more than twenty minutes earlier. If he got a move on, he could probably catch them.

She then went up to the roof where she had the spies stashed away and told them what had happened. She said that as far as she was concerned the customer was always right, and she had no intention of squealing on them. She also said she felt it in her bones that with Yahweh on his side, Joshua was going to find Jericho a pushover when the attack began. All she asked in return for her services was that when the boys came marching in, they'd give her and her family a break.

The spies were only too happy to agree. She let them down with a rope, and they beat it back to headquarters to report to Joshua. A few days later, when Joshua went through Jericho like a dose of salts, he saw to it that Rahab and her family got out before he burned the place down, and they lived happily ever after.

**A**s Rahab received Joshua's spies into her house, so Zacchaeus, a tax collector in bed with the Romans, receives Jesus into his. And in what's to be seen over and over in Luke's gospel, transformation is demonstrated by what someone does with his money. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God," Jesus says. [see Luke 18: 18 – 30] What the rich young ruler wouldn't do, Zacchaeus does. He's a camel who goes through the eye of a needle.

On the way into Jericho, Jesus heals a blind man named Bartimaeus. Next he meets a man who wants to see him. This is important in context, because the disciples are blind to what Jesus has been trying to get them to see: he is going up to Jerusalem to die. He has set his face to Golgotha and a tree.

It's in a tree that Zacchaeus meets Jesus. My brother-in-law Joel White is a New Testament scholar teaching at a seminary in Germany. Joel says that whenever he thinks of Zacchaeus, he pictures him as Danny DeVito. *That is perfect casting!* He's 'short in stature'. The original language, ηλικία μικρος, comes into English flat. The French is *debonnaire*: petite taille. Zacchaeus is a craven collaborator and extortionist. He wants to spy on some Jesus action and he becomes more than a spy.

The sycamore fig tree Zacchaeus has climbed serves him two purposes. It gives him what he is good at finding, an advantage. It also gives him what a Jewish legman for the Roman IRS could use, some cover. It provides him what Adam and Eve figured their fig leaves got them: the ability without fear of shame to risk exposure. This is

where God always finds us: where we're hiding. And this is where God asks the question. "Where are you?" or, as Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "What are you doing up there?"

That's a voice we're not ready to hear. We all want unnoticed to catch a glimpse of Jesus. What we're not at all sure we want is to meet him, to hear from the One who sees in us crooked things that one way or another he will have to demolish.

**J**esus destroys Zacchaeus's disastrous social life by spending time with him. "Come down from there. I'm coming to your house today." This is the heart of discipleship; doing what you're doing here now, spending time with Jesus. What happened to Zacchaeus 'doing time' with Jesus? Luke quotes him saying: "Look, Lord, whaddya say I give half my income to the poor, and anyone I've cheated, I pay him back four times that in damages?"

In the biblical alphabet of grace we go from Abel to Zacchaeus and it turns out his story is the gospel in a nutshell. We betray a trust and make a mess of things. We're ashamed. God comes looking for us as he came looking among the trees for Adam and Eve. God eats with sinners. It offends people who want Jesus to be nice, not to fraternize with people he shouldn't give the time of day. But it is with Zacchaeus that Jesus spends time. So does the doomed get saved. So does the Savior become the doomed. Among fig leaves. Up a tree.

This Jesus, to meet him, to hear him call you by name and ask you what you're doing, ends the life you make for yourself. He destroys not just the way you think about things, he lays waste to the way you handle everything, the way you handle people and the way you handle your income. So when you think about how you want to live your life and what to do with your money, remember Zacchaeus. And be like Danny DeVito.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*St Stephen's Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bayview Avenue, Belvedere, CA,  
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o'clock. For more information about our life and mission  
please email us at [office@ststephenschurch.org](mailto:office@ststephenschurch.org), call us at 415-435-4501,  
or visit us at [www.ststephenschurch.org](http://www.ststephenschurch.org).*