

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Encouragement Along the Way: Inviting
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Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Luke 19:1-10

It was early evening and they were walking along the dunes on one of the barrier islands off of the Georgia coast. Ed was looking for petrified sharks' teeth and Barbara was looking out for sand burrs in order not to step on them. Then as Barbara Brown-Taylor tells the story, they were surprised as they stumbled over a large loggerhead turtle. It was barely alive. Its shell still hot from the days sun. The turtle was half buried in the sand. Barely alive. They both realized in an instant what had happened. The turtle had come ashore to lay its eggs, then searched the horizon for the light that would lead it back to water. But as the sun set and the city lights came on, the turtle mistook the bright city lights for the lights of the moon and the stars reflecting off the ocean. So, the turtle went the wrong way. It moved away from the water rather than towards it. Buried deeper and deeper into the sand, its strength wore out. It was lost and had no energy to continue.

Taylor's story as she tells it in her book Learning to Walk in the Dark is for me the perfect metaphor for our struggle to walk in the way of Jesus, in the way of God. We know, that just as that turtle's calling was to go on shore, lay her eggs and return to the sea, to keep her species alive, we know our calling. It is to live lives of loving God, neighbor and caring for creation. It is to live in imitation of Jesus, showing forgiveness, compassion and care for not just for friends but those on the margins of society. And like the turtle, we move forward, doing our best trying to follow Jesus, who as the Gospel of John declares, is the light of the world; the one whose life shines such that the darkness cannot overcome it. Yet in the opposite direction, there are other lights. There are the bright lights of appearance, accumulation, achievement and adoration. We see those lights and our lives turn toward them, believing that they are where we will find our life's meaning and purpose; that they are where we will find real life. And the more we move toward those lights, the more we bog down. The more tired we become because they cannot give us life. They can only leave us tired and empty and lost.

If you want to see how this works, all you need do is look to the story of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a Jew who lived in Jericho. Jericho was a center of wealth and trade. Josephus described it as a "divine region" and the "fattest" in Palestine. It held legendary date palm groves and balsam wood used for perfume. It was also a crossroads of trade because of its location and its springs which still flow today. What this meant was that it was the perfect location for a tax collector to make his fortune. I would offer that Zacchaeus understood clearly what it meant to follow in the way of God. He knew what the Torah required. He could see the light. But there were brighter lights; wealth, power, acceptance by the ruling elites. That was the path he had chosen. Yet, it bogged him down. Like the sand around the turtle, all the taxes he collected and the cut he took, only moved him further and further away from his calling as a child of God. Luke describes his distance from God by telling us that Zacchaeus was such an outsider that he could only see Jesus by climbing a tree because no one would let him through the crowd. He was on the outside looking in. He was lost. But that all changed with a simple invitation; an invitation from Jesus.

Granted it was a strange invitation in several ways. First it was strange because Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house. Jesus said, "Zacchaeus, hurry, I must stay at your house today." Second it

was a strange invitation because Zacchaeus was the most hated man in town. He was a thief and a traitor. Which is why the people grumbled about Jesus eating with a sinner. Finally, it was strange because of what happened at that dinner. Jesus says nothing and yet Zacchaeus is transformed. Notice, that as Luke tells the story, Jesus does not condemn him. Jesus does not lecture him on the Torah. Jesus does not tell him how he must change. Jesus says nothing, and yet suddenly Zacchaeus turns away from the bright lights of money and power and turns toward the light in Jesus; the light in the beloved community. We know he does because he declares that he will give half of his goods to the poor, when the Law only requires him to give ten-percent. We know he does because he promises to repay anyone he defrauded four times what he owes, when the Law only requires two times. Zacchaeus is suddenly no longer lost, but he is found. By being in the presence of Jesus, in the presence of the true light of the world, he rediscovers his bearings and finds life.

This transformative power of being in the presence of Jesus is why what we do here in this place, in this community, matters so much. I say that because we are more than the church, we are the living body of Christ. And as the living body of Christ, we encounter the true light whenever we come together. We encounter it in scripture, preaching, sacraments and music. We encounter it in service and community. We encounter it in friendships and inclusive welcomes. We also encounter it at home when we pray together and love one another. We encounter it with our friends when we care and forgive. We encounter it out in the world when we show the love of Jesus Christ. But, we are only able to encounter it because once upon a time, we were invited into the community. It is when we were invited in to experience the light and when we were invited in to be encouraged and to have our lives redirected. Some of us like Eve (who was baptized this morning), were invited in by our parents. Others of us were invited in by friends or strangers. Others of us were invited in by the Holy Spirit. But ultimately it was an invitation that allowed us to turn toward the light of Christ that offers us life and purpose and meaning.

What I would ask you to do for a moment is to close your eyes to do two things. First think about who invited you in. Then take a moment and give thanks for that person. Second, slowly think about your friends and family. Ask yourself who is looking for the light. Who is looking for some meaning in life. Who is seeking encouragement. Whose life might be changed by an invitation to come to the beloved community. Then pray that God might open a way for you to invite them; to invite them to encounter the life changing light of Christ that is here in our midst. Now open your eyes.

Before we close I want to be sure that we know what happened to the turtle. Ed left Barbara with the turtle while he went and sought help. Soon Ed and a park ranger returned and the three of them flipped the turtle on its back, carefully attached a chain to the turtle and ranger's truck and dragged the turtle back to the water. Then as the waves slowly washed over the loggerhead it regained its life and swam away. Second, I want to be clear that this is where our story diverges from Barbara's story. It diverges because we are not to forcefully drag people to church; or guilt them; or lecture them. Jesus did none of these things. Jesus simply invited. He left it up to Zacchaeus whether to accept. Whether to respond. That is our task. It is not to keep the encouragement of the light of God in Christ only for ourselves, but to invite others to share in it. So that they too can discover the joy and life that comes from following the way of Jesus.

My challenge to you then is this, to prayerfully ask God to give you an opportunity to invite one other person into the body of Christ so that they might find encouragement for living in the way of Jesus, the way of life.