

Jesus is our Friend©

Luke 19:1-10

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Isn't it great to have friends? I mean, really good friends?

Like the one you can just kick back with and let your hair down and not ever be guarded with; the ones whom you can confide in with your deepest concerns or secrets; the friends whom you trust to never rat you out, never make fun of you and certainly never will judge you.

A true blue friend who is as close and maybe closer than a sister or brother. Of course, a true friend is also honest with you and will tell you directly and with love when they see something you are doing that might be hurtful to yourself or to others. But you trust them so much they can be honest and you will listen.

In Vacation Bible School these past few days, the children have learned that Jesus is that kind of friend. He is the one we can trust with every secret, with every hurt, with our sorrows, our problems and our joys. I think so often we forget that he is right here with us, even on a personal level, always loving us, forgiving us, and helping us to go in the right direction.

Our Bible lesson is about a little man named Zacchaeus who was a tax collector. And tax collectors were known for being cheaters – they would collect more than was necessary and keep some for themselves. At least, some of them did.

And a tax collector was a person who worked for the Roman government. He was a Jew, but his loyalty was to Rome, which, as you can imagine, did not go over so good! No wonder the common people despised him.

When Jesus was traveling through the city of Jericho, where Zach, the tax collector lived and worked, the short little Zach was truly eager to see this man he had been hearing about.

I've often wondered why he was so curious about Jesus. Enough so eager that he was willing to climb a tree just to get to see him. I don't know how old Zacchaeus was, but I know for sure, at my age, it would be nearly impossible for me to climb a tree. Maybe he was younger, stronger, maybe he was very fit for his age. Whatever it was, Luke tells us that is just what he did.

We don't know a lot about Zacchaeus except that he was not liked and that he was a tax collector and it sounds like he confesses that he had, indeed, taken too much from people because after Jesus' visit, he promises to make things right with all the people he had cheated.

Zach probably never expected that Jesus would see him up in that Sycamore tree, let alone invite himself to the home of Zacchaeus! We all know that little children's song that we learned in Sunday School so long ago. I can still remember singing it loudly and pointing my finger along with the other kids and my teacher. "Zacchaeus! You come down! For I'm going to your house today!"

While Zach was thrilled that Jesus singled him out, the people were pretty indignant. They did not think a person like Jesus should be associating with a worm like Zacchaeus.

But isn't that just the point with Jesus? He was always interested in those who were looked down on, those who were in the margins, who were treated badly, and yes, he was always interested in sinners.

Jesus paid special care and attention to those who were considered sinners.

Of course, some people were thought of as sinners just because they had a disability – a blind person was a sinner because of something they, or their parent had done that was against God.

A poor person was a sinner. They would not be poor if they had lived a righteous life.

A woman was sinner, well, just for being a woman sometimes.

But, we can see how they would consider someone who cheated people out of their hard earned money so he could have more money; someone who, out of greed, took advantage of those who had little to begin with.

So we can probably agree that in this case, Zacchaeus was a sinner.

And Jesus became his friend.

Because of Jesus' care and friendship, Zacchaeus became a changed person.

Throughout the gospels, as we read the stories of Jesus, we see, time after time, people's lives being changed ... transformed!

The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are healed, the sinners are forgiven and set on the right path. Women and children and old people suddenly are valued and cared for. The hopeless have hope restored.

In Romans 5, the apostle Paul writes about how, through Jesus, we have become friends with God.

Jesus came to save us from ourselves and from our self-loathing. He came to forgive and, as he said in John 3: 17 he came not to condemn but that the world – all people – might have new life and have reconciliation with God.

Jesus, our friend, gave himself – his entire life and breath up for us so that we might have this new life with God.

It is through his Spirit, the Holy Spirit that he promised to send to all who believe – it is through the Holy Spirit that we can have that sense of Jesus being with us, beside us – always our most trusted friend. He is always with you, ready to give comfort and healing and hope.

Just this past week I had two different people stop in to the office. They are not members here and they were not people I knew but they were both in grief and some despair. They wanted prayer more than anything else. So I sat with them and prayed. This is what I love most about being a minister – those times when people are open and eager to talk with God, to receive the comfort and peace of Christ.

So we prayed. And it is such a joy to see the change in the faces of those who had felt hopeless and so distraught – to see something new and calm in them – peace, a little joy and a lot of hope that things will be okay.

Jesus is your friend. Think of all the wonderful words he has given.

“Come to me, all you who are carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest.” *Matt. 11:28*

I am the good shepherd.
I know my own and my own know me.
He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
He will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom. *John 10:14*

Let the children come to me,
Do not hinder them;
For to such belongs the kingdom of God. *Mark 10:14b*

I am the bread of life.
Whoever comes to me will never be hungry,
and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. *John 6:35*

I am the resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me,
even though they die, will live,
and everyone who lives and believes in me
will never die. *John 11:25, 26*

Do not let your hearts be troubled.
Believe in God, believe also in me. *John 14:1*

Peace I leave with you;
my peace I give to you.
I do not give to you as the world gives.
Do not let your hearts be troubled,
and do not let them be afraid. *John 14:27*

I have said this to you,
so that in me you may have peace.
In the world you face persecution.
But take courage;
I have conquered the world! *John 16:33*

This is a true statement that you can always count on: Jesus is our friend.
He is always here and always loves you and will never let you down. You can
trust him – literally – with your life.

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