Welcome Home

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4
Luke 19:1-10

 “Welcome home.” On the surface of it, this seems like an odd thing for Jesus to say. After all, the home belongs to Zacchaeus. A half hour ago, Zacchaeus was up in a tree trying to get a look at Jesus as he passes by. As Jesus comes close to the low hanging branches of the Sycamore tree where Zacchaeus has stationed himself, Jesus looks up and yells out, “Zacchaeus, come on down, I will be having dinner at your house today and spending the night”. My wife, Michele, is in New York this weekend visiting her parents. Would it be O.K. with you if at the end of the service, I said to you, “I will be coming to your house for lunch. What’s on the menu?” That’s pretty much what Jesus does with Zachaeus. Now as they enter the home of Zacchaeus, Jesus adds another twist to his announced dinner plans by saying to Zacchaeus, “Welcome Home”.

 Truth be told, Zachaeus home was about the only place he did feel welcome. All of his life Zacchaeus has felt like an outsider, like someone who doesn’t quite fit in with the rest of the people. As a child Zachaeus was smaller than all the other kids. He was often teased because of his height, “Hey Shorty, hey small fry”. The other kids rarely used his name.

 As time went on Zacchaeus developed a hard shell of protection. He found it safer keeping to himself, rather than run the risk of letting folks get to know him. Zacchaeus was one of those people who could travel through a crowd without anyone ever really noticing he was there, or at least that is how it seemed to Zacchaeus. When the tax collector position became available, Zacchaeus jumped on it without hesitation.

 Rome has no concern how tax collectors collect their money as long as they collect it. As an added incentive tax collectors can keep whatever extra they are able to collect. As one commentator put it, tax collectors are like today’s predatory lending banks on steroids. Zachaeus knows that those collecting taxes on behalf of King Herod and the Roman Empire are extremely unpopular. But Zacchaes figures no one gives him the time of day anyway, so what difference would that make. He might as well make a decent living at one of the few jobs available where one can make real money.

 There is no middle class. What exists is a small percentage of folks who have varying degrees of wealth and a very large percentage of folks who have varying degrees of poverty. The wealth of the few is made possible by the poverty of the many. Luke tells us Zacchaeus is one of the rich and his wealth is made possible by his role as a tax collector.

Zacchaeus is extremely unpopular. When he goes to the market, people ignore him or even turn away. He has no real friends. Jesus extends a welcome home to Zacchaeus in the one place, the only place, where he actually does feel welcome.

It took some courage for Zacchaeus to climb that tree. Luke says nothing about what motivates Zaachaeus. It could be that Zaachaeus is simply curious about what all the fuss is about, though it is hard to imagine he would take the risk or go to so much trouble just out of curiosity. I wonder if Zaachaeus climbs that tree with the same orientation that some folks come to church, with little expectation that anything will happen, but maybe, just maybe the slightest hope that some emptiness might be filled, the loneliness might be lessened, an ember of hope might be ignited, a sense of purpose might be rediscovered, some place of brokenness might be healed. Sometimes we simply need to take that risk, climb the tree, go through the door, let ourselves be exposed, even when it seems that it will make no difference at all. Zaachaeus has no real expectation that climbing this tree will change his life in any way. Yet there he is.

As Jesus approaches the tree where Zaachaeus has positioned himself, some people in the crowd begin to point him out. “That’s Zaachaeus up there, hanging onto that branch. The little pip squeak is nothing but a big traitor. He calls himself a Jew, but we want nothing to do with him. He works for the Romans, getting rich off of our suffering. Our children go hungry so he can live in his big home and enjoy all the latest luxuries that Rome doles out to people who help keep them in power.”

Understandably, when the crowd looks up at Zaachaeus all they see is someone who is the source of trouble, heartache, and who adds to their suffering. They see Zaachaeus and they want nothing to do with him. He is a lost cause. They see nothing else.

But, when Jesus approaches the tree and sees this small man wedged in-between a couple of branches, Jesus sees something else.

Jesus sees a person who has taken a risk just to be where he is. Jesus sees someone who has yet to give up on himself, but is holding out hope, just like he is holding onto that branch. Jesus looks up at the tree and rather than simply see someone who is a traitor to his people, Jesus sees an outsider, who is waiting to be welcomed home. Jesus looks up at Zaachaeus and rather than a person imprisoned by greed, Jesus sees someone who is eager to be liberated and set free with a spirit of generosity. Jesus sees in Zaachaeus what others are unable to see.

 “Hurry, come on down,” says Jesus, “I must stay at your house today.” As they come up the walk and then come through the front door, Jesus says to Zaachaeus, “welcome home”. Zaachaeus knows that Jesus welcome goes well beyond the walls of this house, which has been his place of safety and solitude. When Jesus says, ”welcome home”, Zaachaeus is being welcomed into the Realm of God where divisions of every sort are overcome.

 Welcome home Zacchaeus, you may have spent your whole life feeling like an outsider, living like an outsider, but God sees the potential you have for generosity and compassion. Welcome home Zacchaeus, you are invited to a new way of life where divisions of rank, hierarchy, gender, race, height, weight all the many ways that feed separation and oppression are no more. Welcome home. In this household of faith you are encouraged to live with generosity toward those who are in need. Welcome home in to a household that rejects the dominant norms of a culture putting a higher premium on material possessions than it does on people. Welcome home to a household of faith where your brothers and sisters include the birds of the air, the fish of the sea, the rivers and the trees. Welcome home Zacchaeus where the union we share includes all the saints who have gone before, living faithfully to the love and justice of God. Welcome home Zacchaeus.

Those who are steeped in the dominant culture norms of separation and exclusion have a hard time seeing how Zacchaeus, this sinner, this outsider could be welcomed into the household of faith. But that is precisely what Jesus does and continues to do. It is a risk because the household of faith into which Zacchaeus is invited undermines the systems of domination and oppression in Jesus day and our day. It is why Jesus is such a threat to Rome and it is why those who continue following the way of Jesus continue to be a threat today.

 Welcome home Zacchaeus. It is a welcome extended to each of us. It is at the heart of the common meal we share when we break bread and drink from the cup. Welcome home, come be a part of a new way of living. Welcome home, drink from the cup of compassion and sacrifice. Welcome home, eat the bread of love and commitment. Welcome home to a household in which we are surrounded by all the saints who have kept the faith alive.

 Welcome home. When Zacchaeus walks through the doors and hears the welcome Jesus extends, he knows what he needs to do. Zacchaeus immediately takes half of what he has and gives it to those in need and any he had defrauded, he gives them four times as much in return. In the household of faith, the spirit of generosity and the desire to be part of God’s healing is extremely contagious.

 Welcome home. The invitation is there for all. Welcome home.

**Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4**

*In our first lesson the prophet reminds us that in a life of faith one can often begin to feel discourage. The problems, the injustices, the suffering can be overwhelming. And yet, the prophet refuses to give up, waiting in faithfulness until the reminder comes that we have been given a vision of a new world and it is our calling to make it clear, so all can see.*

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not listen? Or cry to you "Violence!"
and you will not save? Why do you make me see wrongdoing and look at trouble? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. So the law becomes slack and justice never prevails. The wicked surround the righteous— therefore judgment comes forth perverted.
I will stand at my watch-post, and station myself on the rampart; I will keep watch to see what he will say to me, and what he will answer concerning my complaint. Then the Lord answered me and said: Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it.  For there is still a vision for the appointed time; it speaks of the end, and does not lie. If it seems to tarry, wait for it; it will surely come, it will not delay. Look at the proud. Their spirit is not right in them,
but the righteous live by their faith.

**Luke 19:1-10**

*In our Gospel lesson we hear the familiar story of Zacchaeus, a rich tax collector, detested by the people, who nonetheless garners up his courage, and climbs a tree in hopes of seeing Jesus.*

He 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 sycomore 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 there 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."