

Faith Mennonite Church  
April 2, 2017 – 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Lent  
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### **Shout out! Step up! Encounter Jesus!**

*Luke 18:31 – 19:10*

Jesus was passing through St. Paul on his way to Minneapolis. His small motorcade of used cars took the 241A exit off of I-94 so they could drive down University Avenue through Frogtown. When the cars stopped for the traffic light at St. Anthony Avenue, Jesus got out to walk for a while. The corner, which usually had a single panhandler, was now crowded with an excited, cheering crowd. The panhandler, surprised by all the company that was pushing him away from the intersection, began to ask what was going on. “It’s Jesus!” people said. “Jesus is passing through St. Paul!” The panhandler began to shout with all he could muster, “Jesus, Jesus, please, please, *anything* will help! The crowd tried to shush him. They had grown used to seeing panhandlers on their street corners, but they didn’t want Jesus to see that homelessness still exists in the capitol city, the beautiful city named for St. Paul with a grand cathedral that faces the capitol building. But the panhandler refused to be silenced. He shouted even louder, “Jesus, Jesus, son of God, have mercy on me!”

Jesus stopped and asked the crowd to make a way for the person who was shouting. When the panhandler squeezed through, Jesus asked him: “What do you want me to do for you?” “Lord, give me dignity...a place to stay and enough money so I don’t need to beg.” Jesus reached to him and said, “What you desire is granted; your faith has saved you.” The man stood several inches taller, dropped his sign, and followed Jesus, giving thanks to God. And everyone around them started to cheer. The joy was infectious.

After motorcading down University Avenue to Snelling Avenue, Jesus and the crowd turned south and then proceeded along Marshall Avenue to the Lake Street Bridge. It was a Wednesday so the usual group protesting war had their spots on both sides of the bridge. Jesus’s motorcade honked loudly in support of the protestors. Once again, Jesus got out to walk. All of a sudden he looked up and saw a man who had shimmied up one of the light poles. He was dressed in a bright red T-shirt with a white target on the front. When Jesus stopped and looked up, people started to whisper, “That’s Governor Dayton!” “Governor,” Jesus said, “please come down, I would like to be your guest today ... and bring along the Republican leadership.” Some in the crowd began to grumble: “But the governor didn’t include an increase for the Minnesota Family Investment Program in his budget.” “And the Republican leadership, all they can think about is tax rebates.”

Later, as Jesus and the former panhandler sat with Governor Dayton and the Republican leadership, the governor said, “We will make sure that the poorest families in Minnesota receive enough benefits to raise them out of poverty.” And the Republican leadership said, “Rather than tax rebates for the middle and upper class, we will redirect any surplus toward affordable housing until every Minnesotan has a home.” Then Jesus said to them, “Today salvation has come to this state, for all of you are beloved of God. I have come to seek out and save the lost—and that includes everyone one of you. All are equal in my sight.”

Today’s text from Luke continues last Sunday’s emphasis on the matter of poverty and wealth in the Kingdom of God. It also contains the search for a Jesus encounter by two very different people—one poor the other rich—and the ways that others stood in the way of those encounters. For the poor, blind man, whom the crowds were content to cut off from an encounter with Jesus, we hear the power of his own voice, calling out for mercy. We see Jesus lifting him up, both by asking what it is that he needed and then granting him sight, which would allow him to stand and walk freely. The low is brought high.

By contrast, Zacchaeus, one who is rich and in a position of power, needs to make a spectacle of himself to get noticed by Jesus, because of his short stature. In the presence of a great crowd, Jesus brings him down, but rather than humiliating him, asks him to extend hospitality. The story of Zacchaeus is intriguing. The crowd clearly considered him a sinner, someone who had sold out to the occupying authority as a tax collector. But the text leaves things open to interpretation. The translation we read this morning has Zacchaeus saying, “Half of my possessions I *will* give to the poor.” But other translations render this as simply “half of my possessions I give to the poor.” Was this a new commitment or something he was already doing? His comment about defrauding others is stated as a possibility not a confession: “*if* I have defrauded...” and here his commitment of four-fold repayment echoes Jewish law. Was Zacchaeus a law-observing Jew?

While we cannot fully know Luke's intention in his telling these stories, clearly he shows that both rich and poor share a desire for an encounter with Jesus. Each are willing to take a risk for the sake of the encounter, which for both, is life-giving and transformative.

What do we make of the crowds? In both cases they seem to be folks who are also desiring an encounter with Jesus, right? But, in the case of the blind man, they lose no time in trying to shush him, to keep him out of sight of Jesus. Are those the actions of a Jesus follower? And, in the case of Zacchaeus, they seem less than happy that Jesus has chosen this man for an encounter and a home visit. Are they truly seeking an encounter with Jesus or just joining the crowd as the in-thing to do, or for what they might gain?

We need to be wary of crowds, whether they form around the persons we like or dislike. The presence of a crowd does not validate every experience. In his memoir, *The Pastor*, Eugene Peterson, author of many books including the contemporary translation of the Bible, *The Message*, tells of a pastor colleague who announced he was leaving the small town where they were both pastors. Pastor Phillip announced to the group of pastors that met regularly, that he was moving to "a church with a thousand members, three times the size of where he was." He viewed this opportunity as "more promising" and an "opportunity to 'multiply his effectiveness.'" Eugene felt uneasy about Phillip's motivation for leaving and he wrote him a letter, from which I quote:

*You mentioned [the church's] prominence in the town, a center, a kind of cathedral that would be able to provide influence for the Christian message far beyond its walls.... I am ... suspicious of the appeal and believe that gratifying it is destructive both to the gospel and the pastoral vocation. It is the kind of thing America specializes in, and one of the consequences is that American religion and the pastoral vocation are in a shabby state.*

*It is also the kind of thing for which we have abundant documentation through twenty centuries now, of debilitating both congregation and pastor. [...] Every time the church's leaders depersonalize, even a little, the worshipping/loving community, the gospel is weakened. And size is the great depersonalizer. Kierkegaard's criticism is still cogent: 'the more people, the less truth.'*

*The only way the Christian life is brought to maturity is through intimacy, renunciation, and personal deepening. [...] It is true that these things can take place in the context of large congregations, but only by strenuously going against the grain. Largeness is an impediment, not a help.*

*Classically, there are three ways in which humans try to find transcendence [...] apart from God as revealed in the cross of Jesus: through the ecstasy of alcohol and drugs, through the ecstasy of recreational sex, through the ecstasy of crowds. Church leaders frequently warn against the drugs and the sex, but, at least in America, almost never against the crowds. Probably because they get so much ego benefit from the crowds.*

*But a crowd destroys the spirit as thoroughly as excessive drink and depersonalized sex. It takes us out of ourselves, but not to God, only away from [God]. [...] A crowd is an exercise in false transcendence upward, which is why all crowds are spiritually pretty much the same, whether at football games, political rallies, or church. [...] I really do feel that crowds are a worse danger, far worse, than drink or sex, and pastors may be the only people on the planet who are in a position to encourage an imagination that conceives of congregation strategically not in terms of size but as a congenial setting for becoming mature in Christ in community, not a crowd.<sup>1</sup>*

Eugene Peterson never received a response to his letter nor had a chance to talk further with Phillip. We've never been a large church, locally or as a denomination, so Peterson's admonition may not seem to apply to us. But anyone who has taken part in a march or rally can identify with the surge we feel when we're in a crowd. Even the best marches have moments when the chants depersonalize those whom we oppose. Certainly, in the current political life of our nation, we see how crowd size has come to signify legitimacy.

As we move into the final two weeks of Lent, today's Gospel invites us to reflect on what action(s) we need to take to move more deeply into our encounter with Jesus. Do we need to more boldly cry out? Do we need to become more vulnerable? Equally important, is there anything in our life, individually or communally, that is blocking another person from moving nearer to Jesus? Can we see, affirm, and encourage the work of God around us? Do we recognize Jesus when he passes through town?

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene H. Peterson, *The Pastor: A Memoir*. Harper One, 2011. (156-158)