

May 6, 2018

Acts 29: Writing the Next Chapter

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Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got. Taking a break from all your worries sure would help a lot. Wouldn't you like to get away? Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name? What was the name of the guy that when the door popped open and he came in – what was his name? Everyone yells: NORM! See, I didn't even need to cue you guys because it's just so ingrained in us. Now, if you don't have any idea what I'm talking about, you were probably born after 1993. Can you believe it's been 25 years since the show *Cheers* went off the air? Yet most of you in this room could still speak the words of that little song that started every show but especially that line that says, "Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name."

This idea speaks to the concept for today, connection. We know the name Zacchaeus. Jesus knew the name Zacchaeus - somehow. We don't know how. It doesn't much matter, but that's where the connection begins. Connection for today – I'm going to give a description for it as being anything we do that initiates a meaningful point of contact. Now, I just need to hold on to that. Connection is anything that we do – it's an action verb – anything that we do that initiates a meaningful point of contact obviously between people. Now in *Cheers*, you know, it was "where everyone knows your name," and everybody knew Norm's name, and everybody knew everybody else's name, but I'm wondering these days if knowing someone's name is critical to connection. I'm not sure. I just heard a beautiful testimony from one of our volunteers who is with Families Moving Forward this week, those homeless families that come to stay with us for a week at a time, and Jo was telling me how important it was to them that she knew their names.

So, I get that, and I think that's right. I think it's important that we know each other's names, but I don't think we have to know one another's names to initiate a meaningful point of contact. You know, for the better part of about five years, I was an active participant in a community called CrossFit. Now, for those of you who know anything about CrossFit, I'm going to pause and let the absurdity of my involvement in CrossFit settle in for you, but CrossFit is an intentional community of fitness. Their called boxes. It's not a gym. It's not a fitness center. It's not a health club. It's a CrossFit box 'cause that's where they do their work. It's just an empty box, and they got weights and bars and ropes and all these implements of pain and agony in those places, but they come together at set times, and it's a different group every time, but what happens is the same every time. Once everybody's there, and it's time to start, they get in a little circle, and the first time I went, I was like, "Whoa! What is this, church?" I mean, I thought we were going to hold hands and say a prayer. We didn't hold hands. We didn't say a prayer, but the leader offered a question, and each person, one at a time, went around the circle and offered their answer to that question, and it wasn't just, "What's your favorite color?" It was a question of real import, and the most fascinating things would happen in that circle before anybody lifted a barbell or began to run or break a sweat. There was a meaningful point of contact. It was good church for a long time for me. In lots of way, I think they do it better than we do. Now, you don't know everybody's name. You don't need to know everybody's name. You just need that meaningful point of contact.

Right now, the reason Jodie Nyberg isn't here, and the reason that Rustin and Danielle are gone, the reason that at least a quarter to a third of our staff is gone is because we have initiated this morning "Operation Imagination." Everybody on staff has been required to take two Sundays in the month of May, and they're being dispatched into small groups, two groups each Sunday, each visiting two churches in the Twin Cities, churches that have been selected based on their size and their vitality so that they look at least a little bit like us or are functioning at a larger, higher level than us. Their going in these groups as mystery worshippers, and they're going to go, and they're going to experience these places first hand, primarily to see what happens, what is a meaningful point of contact at other churches. Operation Imagination. We're opening our imaginations and things that we can learn from other churches. Now, the learning's going to go on farther than just connection, but that's where it's going to start. What is their experience from the parking lot to the pew (or to the seats) of these churches, and over the next four weeks, we're going to visit sixteen churches, and one of the great things that we're going to learn is what makes for a meaningful point of contact.

Now, sticking with the story this morning, Jesus initiates a meaningful point of contact with Zacchaeus, right? Zacchaeus was a tax collector. He was a rich guy, but he was really short. So, he ran ahead of the parade, a big crowd, climbed up a sycamore tree. Why? Because he wanted to get a glimpse of this one named Jesus, and when Jesus was walking by, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, (called him by name) Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down because I have to go stay with you tonight." A meaningful point of contact. Now, we don't know where this goes yet in the story, but we'll learn soon. A meaningful point of contact. It's just the starting point for all of us. Imagine what that could do for us as we come into this church or come into this community to know, above all, whether somebody knows my name or not doesn't matter, but I know that I am welcome. I know that I am at home in this place. Don't ever take that for granted. Those of you who have been around here for a long time, don't ever take that for granted. Take that sense of home and that sense of belonging and that very intentional connection that somebody once made for you, and make it for someone else. You never know how you might just change their life. Just ask Zacchaeus. So, meaningful point of contact is what it means to connect with another human being.

The story goes on here in verse six. So, what happened next? Zacchaeus hurried down and was happy to welcome Jesus. I love that. That's a great response, and it's instructive for us because what Zacchaeus did was invite Jesus into his home, and, in this day and age, home was church. They had temple, to be sure, but home was church. Home was where the gatherings happened, where people interacted with one another. Home was the center of their lives. Zacchaeus invited Jesus into his home and kind of into his church. There's an instructive word in here for us today that has to do with a fundamental shift that's happening in churches across America. I can demonstrate this shift statistically first. Twenty-five years ago, when I got into ministry, research would demonstrate that Americans on average attended church 2.1 times per month. About ten years ago, a similar study came out indicating that Americans were attending church just 1.6 times per month. Last year, same study, 1.3. It's continuing on a decline, and it's a matter of frequency because what's really fascinating is that, even as church attendance or frequency of attendance has declined, giving and charitable giving to churches has been on the increase. It's continuing to climb.

We've seen both of these realities right here at Wayzata Community Church. We've seen shifts in our attendance, but we've seen giving on the rise. They don't seem to go together. They don't make sense. Something must be changing right before our very eyes. Let me illustrate this with a quick story. Twenty-five years ago when I started ministry, if I was out and about, like going to the grocery store or ran into somebody from church, and they recognized me as the pastor of their church, they'd almost always come up sheepishly, and they'd say, "I'm really sorry, Pastor. I know I haven't been there since Christmas, you know," especially the people I know or like Christmas and Easter people, I could see them coming, and they had shame and guilt just dripping off them, right, and they'd apologize up and down, and I'd say, "It's okay, but I'll see you Sunday, right?" When I run into people at Lund's now who I know full well are Christmas and Easter people – this is free of judgment, please – but if I run into people at Lund's, invariably if I have not seen them in church for a long, long time, there's no more guilt or shame or kind of shrinking. They invariably say, "Hey, I just love our church. I just love our church!" You know, cynically I want to say, "Really, what's the evidence of that?" No, I'm just kidding, but it's a total shift in dynamic, and it speaks not only to a sense of belonging that we talked about last week but a connection that happens every time they come here. Christmas and Easter – the numbers around Christmas and Easter since I came to this church, more than four times what it was when I first came. Points of connection. Frequency.

All this just tells us one thing – that the Church isn't dying. The reports of the Church's death have been greatly exaggerated. The truth of the matter is that the Church is just changing because we're changing. The church has always been changing – all the way back to Zacchaeus. Last week I asked you to consider, what's the entry point to a church like this as it relates to belonging. Do you have to believe in order to belong, or is it possible now we need to belong before we're even able to believe? It's a yes/and. It's a both/and reality. This week I've been pondering, when it comes to church, it used to be worship attendance would drive engagement, but I think what we're seeing is that actually engagement comes first, and it drives people into a more meaningful experience of worship, that engagement begins with a meaningful point of contact and a sense of connection. Whether it's once a year or once a week is irrelevant, but we've got to take it seriously, and we've got to make every effort to be like Jesus to reach out. The question you have to ask yourself is whether you're going to fight those changes in the church or if you're going to go with it and grow with it.

The story continues in verse 7. This is where it takes a turn. After Zacchaeus came down and was happy to welcome Jesus, it says, "All who saw began to grumble, and they said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'" About ten years ago, a little less than ten years ago, Barna Group did a research project around the country that got a lot of attention at the time. Through this study we got our report card from 18 to 29 year olds. Eighty-Nine percent of 18 to 29 year olds, just a little less than ten years ago, perceived the Church as being hypocritical and judgmental. No wonder they weren't here. Ninety percent perceiving the Church – this is the wider Church, not only this church, but I'm sure it applies - hypocritical and judgmental. Now those 18 to 29 year olds are 26 to 37 years old. It doesn't take long for life to unfold before our very eyes. And I gotta tell you, a lot of those 26 to 37 year olds will be at the Excelsior Brewing Company tonight at 5 pm because their church is going to break out at Excelsior Brewing Company tonight at 5 o'clock, a place where they don't feel judged, a place where they don't feel surrounded by hypocrisy, a place where maybe everyone will know their name but probably not,

and it won't matter because I know for a fact someone there is going to initiate a meaningful point of contact for them, and they're going to feel like they're at home.

Now, a lot of those 26 to 37 years olds are not here this morning, and I think it's for the same reason that it was less than ten years ago. It's because they find us to be grumpy. We're just grumpy. The Church is grumpy, just like it was in Luke 19. "All who saw began to grumble." You have to be grumpy, technically, to grumble, and the Church is grumpy, and it said, "now he's going to stay with a real sinner." Early record of the Church's judgment. Early record of the Church's hypocrisy, and this same war wages yet today in a lot of different forms. Did any of you see the story coming out of Chicago? The United Methodist Church Council of Bishops – did anybody see? Maybe it's just the Church geek in me tracking this. They were meeting under the banner of an effort called A Way Forward. They are still wrestling with what to do with LGBTQ-plus clergy and those that want to be married in a Methodist church. They're still wrestling with this issue, at the very highest level. They're working on this thing called Way Forward. They're trying to come up with a plan by which they can be more open, more inclusive – more connectional. That's their word. They have a plan called the Connectional Conference which is intended for them nationally to be more open, welcome, receptive, loving, connectional with the gay and lesbian members of their community both in leadership positions and those that want to be married in their churches.

A good friend of mine posted this news on his Facebook page. I was so disheartened by the comments that I saw hurled out at my friend who's a deacon in the Methodist Church in Dallas, Texas. I was shocked at the vitriol that was so quick to come. Friends, this same grumpiness around Zacchaeus still exists today, every time we call someone else a sinner or we hold them at arm's length. Let me remind you that we are all sinners; we have all fallen short of the glory of God, but in Christ Jesus we are forgiven. We have grace. That's not my concern. My greater concern is the state of sin that we find ourselves in every time we resist relationship and fail to connect people one to another.

Richard Rohr says it like this, he says, "It is an entirely relational universe. If at any time we try to stop this reality, we fall into the true state of sin, and it's much more a state than a momentary behavior." Are you tracking? He goes on to say, "What we call sins cannot really separate us from God because divine love is unilateral and unconditional and not dependent on our receiving it." Every song we've sung this morning had a thread of God's unconditional love for every single one of us in it. You've said those words this morning. You've sung that song today. He says, "Rather it is our lonely and fearful illusion of separateness that makes us do sinful and selfish things." Relationships, connection is what it means to be one with God and one with each other. It is the opposite of sin. When we refuse relationship and we disallow deep connections, when we're not ready to give and receive, then we are separated from God, and that's the very definition of sin. We've got to stop being grumpy, and we've got to stop being grumpy yesterday. And mean it when we say it that "all are welcome."

Zacchaeus apparently didn't pay too much attention to the people because he had Jesus come, and they had dinner and something later, but then he responded. He said to Jesus, he said, "Look, half of my possessions, I'll give it to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I'll pay back four times as much, and, then, Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to the house because he, too, was the son of Abraham, for the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." You know, in this one

passage we hear Jesus, himself, state his mission – to seek out and to save the lost, and if his mission is going to be our mission, it's going to have something to do with initiating meaningful points of contact between people, not holding them at arm's length- ever. And in that very same passage, we see the results of it. We see Zacchaeus turning his life around. The word repent literally means to turn around. As a tax collector, he used to take money from people and take more than they owed, and keep the rest for himself. Now he's giving it back four-fold. He said he'd give it all back. That's transformation, and that's where we're going to go next week.

So, let me just close with one last question about this whole experience of Zacchaeus and connection in the next chapter in the Church. Who are you in the story? You gotta find yourself in the story because if, as Pdraig O'tuama says, "The answer is in a story," then, you've got to find yourself in the story. Are you like Jesus? Are you calling out to a stranger? Are you making a meaningful point of contact, or are you feeling like that stranger hung up in a tree just trying to get a glimpse of Jesus, or are you in the crowd? Are you among the grumpies? Nobody says, "Yeah, I'm grumpy." Look at your own life. Who are you in the story? Maybe you're Zacchaeus down the road that has experienced for himself transformation. If so, I think you'll be glad to come to church next week because Danielle is going to preach about transformation, but for now, let's close with prayer.

Gracious and loving God, we're grateful for the words of a poet that reminds us that there are answers, but they're in a story. They're not only in a story that's being told, but they're in a story that's being lived out, a story that isn't finished yet. So help us, for having been here this morning, to do our part to make connections, to initiate meaningful points of contact between ourselves and this world that you love so much, a world that you loved enough to send your only son. Be with us in these days until we return to this place of grace and celebrate once again. In Christ's name. Amen.