

“When we can’t see Jesus”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
October 30, 2016

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Today is Reformation Sunday, and perhaps no other name rings out more clearly than that of Martin Luther. We know him as the father of the Reformation, the lion of the faith, who braved excommunication for the sake of his conscience, declaring “Here I stand. I can do no other.” We know him as the man who nailed his 95 theses to cathedral doors, refusing to believe that one could buy one’s way into heaven.

We know him as the preacher who saw the witness of Jesus Christ so clearly that he started a movement without which we Presbyterians would not be standing here.

But did you know that there was a time when young Martin could not see Jesus so well? As a young monk, Martin tried everything to come close to God. He stayed up all night, praying and reading Scripture, forsaking sleep. He whipped himself. He fasted. He exposed himself to the freezing cold. He tried everything to change himself, to become a better and more faithful person, to drive away the sin, and none of it worked.

If only young Martin had met Bob Newhart. Bet you didn’t see that segue coming! You probably know the comedian best as the kind, soft-spoken, deadpan psychologist from *The Bob Newhart Show*. What would he have said to poor, self-flagellating Martin?

Thanks to a MADtv skit, I think I know. Newhart is again a psychiatrist, and he’s seeing a new patient. She tells him that she’s so terrified of being buried alive in a box that she can’t drive through tunnels or ride elevators or be in anything “boxy”... like a house. After patiently listening to her problem, Bob tells her that he wants her to listen very carefully to two words that are going to change her life. She pulls out a pencil and notebook, waiting breathlessly. Bob leans across the desk and says, “Stop it! S-T-O-P, new word, I-T. Just stop it. I mean you don’t want to go through your life being scared of being locked in a box, do you? I mean that sounds frightening! Then stop it!”

If Martin had wandered into Newhart’s skit, I suspect he would have heard, “What do you mean you whip yourself? That sounds painful. Stop it, you kook!”

Of course, that’s easier said than done.

We’ve all made them—those New Year’s resolutions that we’ve completely abandoned just a couple weeks later. In more profound ways, we have given our hearts to God and sincerely pledged to lead more faithful lives. But so often we just slip right back into our old habits.

We've been talking so much, over the last month, about changing the world. But the truth is that it's just as hard to change ourselves. Like young Martin, we strive to see Jesus and to have that communion transform us. But so many obstacles, like those faced by Zacchaeus, get in the way.

Imagine that you're Zacchaeus. People don't like you. You are the chief tax collector. You work for the Roman Empire. You told yourself that someone had to do the job; at least, you could do good from the inside. Life of course didn't work out that way. The money was too tempting. You charged extra; you got rich. Eventually you started giving away some of that money to the poor; you set out to become a different person. But by then it was too late. You'd become a pariah in your own community—no longer Jewish enough, and never Roman enough.

The people in your community sneer behind your back, just loud enough for you to hear. Their words are like barbed hooks in your flesh. You start to wonder if they might be right. Maybe you are no good. Maybe you *are* unredeemable.

Word has reached you, however, of a Jewish rabbi who is a “friend of tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34). Some people say he's the Messiah, perhaps even the Son of God. You know this is your chance; surely he can help.

But when you get to town, such a great crowd of people has gathered that you can't see Jesus. You're too short to see over their heads—always too short. People still make fun of you for your height, just like they did when you were a kid. You consider turning around and going home.

Then you notice it: a sycamore tree. You could climb it. But it'd be embarrassing. Only children climb trees. You'd look like a fool, hiking up your robes and scrambling up a tree.

There are so many things standing between you and the new person you hope Jesus will help you become: the crowd, your pride, the fear of failure, the worry that your sins are too great for forgiveness. There's who you once were and how no one will let you forget or allow you to be someone different. And then there's your money—you've heard that Jesus has commanded the rich to give up their wealth, and the truth is you're not sure you can. You like your money.

This is the moment that turns so many of us back from the brink of change.

Martin Luther almost turned back too.

All he could see in himself was a condemned man. He wrote, “I hated that word, ‘the righteousness of God,’ by which I had been taught... [that] God is righteous and punishes the unrighteous sinner.”

Years later, after meditating day and night on the Psalms and the Book of Romans, he had a flash of insight: salvation wasn't something to be earned; it was a *gift* of grace, through faith. He said, "Here I felt as if I were entirely born again and had entered paradise itself through the gates that had been flung open."

Herein lies one of the central tenets of the Reformation: *we* don't change our lives; God changes our lives, and if we have faith enough to see and believe in that change, we will indeed become new creations.

Zacchaeus changes because he begins to see himself, not as the world sees him, not as the past sees him, not even as he sees himself, but as God sees him.

Imagine again that you are Zacchaeus. You've heard that Jesus instructs us to be like children again. So you decide to throw inhibition to the wind; you leap into that tree. And as Jesus is walking by, your heart starts beating so fast. You're nearly hyperventilating. And then—as if time itself stops—Jesus looks up and sees you. He calls you by name, Zacchaeus. You've never met, but somehow, he knows you. And now—you can hardly believe it—he's telling you to come down because he's going to stay at your house. He wants to be a part of your life. And everyone's murmuring, saying nasty things about you. But for the first time in your life, it doesn't matter; their voices are far off and small. You leap down with joy. And you tell Jesus that a change has already begun in your life. You speak of giving back to the poor and paying reparations to those you've cheated, not in the future tense, as if some far-off promise never to be kept (as presented in the NRSV translation), but in the present tense, saying that even now you are living as if a new person.

Then Jesus says something that you have longed to hear for a really long time: he says that you, outcast and sinner as you may be, are a son of Abraham, a child of God, a child of the covenant, beloved, saved. Jesus declares, "*Today*, salvation has come to this house."

You began by seeking Jesus, trying to see him when you could not, but now Jesus tells you, "Didn't you know, my friend? Didn't you know, my child? I was the one seeking you. I've been looking for you. And now that I see you, I see a son of God, and I hope you see him too."

I am reminded of that old hymn: "I sought the Lord, and afterward I knew, He moved my soul to seek him, seeking me; It was not I that found, O Savior true; No, I was found of thee."

Of course, being found by Christ doesn't mean we will suddenly live sinless lives. Zacchaeus will backslide, as will we all. We will forget to see ourselves as Jesus sees us; we will lose sight of Christ through the crowded throng of life.

We, like Zacchaeus, have to be willing to make changes in order to welcome the real change that comes with Christ's invitation. To change ourselves we have to choose to see ourselves as Christ sees us. That means repenting of, and casting away, all the other visions of who we are. Zacchaeus has to cut away his pride and see himself as a child happy to climb a tree. He has to confess and let go of his sins, cutting away what he once was and silencing others' expectations. He has to surrender the importance of money and status. Only then is there room for Christ to live in him, for joy, for action.

Jesus Christ frees us of the power of these obstacles and invites us into a new way of living. And no matter how many times we fall back, Jesus again calls us by name, reminding us of who God made us to be. And when you see how Jesus looks at you, when you see yourself through his eyes, as a son or daughter of Abraham redeemed—capable of great compassion and justice, though still a humble child in need of a teacher—no longer will you be held captive by the murmuring of others, or by past mistakes, or by privilege and wealth, or by anything or anyone that makes you feel small. You'll be too full of joy. **Amen.**