



Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
First Presbyterian Church
November 13, 2022
Luke 19:1-10

Dear Gage,

Today is a very special day in your life – a day for which your Mom, grandma, and family have waited a long time! Today your family, friends, members of the session, and members of First Presbyterian Church dedicated you to God. They acknowledged that you are God’s child, they promised to guide and nurture you with love and prayer, encouraging you to follow Christ, and they heard me say, “Gage Andrew McGiffen, you have been sealed by the Holy Spirit in baptism, and marked as Christ’s own forever,” and everyone here promised before you and God to guide and nurture you and help you to know Christ better.

Gage, Presbyterians believe that at the heart of all our relationships is our baptism. Your baptism today is a sign and seal that God loves you, that God has called you to be in this special relationship, and that God is with you forever. Think of it as your initiation ceremony into the church.

And although you didn’t fully understand what happened this morning because you’re only 5 years old, we baptized you because it’s something in which our church believes. Presbyterians baptize babies and young children because we believe that you are a part of God’s family and included in God’s family from the moment you’re born.

But this doesn’t mean you can sit back and rest comfortably, Gage. There are Christians who do believe all you have to do to inherit eternal life is be baptized. But we Presbyterians aren’t among them; we believe that your baptism initiates a life of service. See, when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, John told him to “repent, for the kingdom of God is here.” That’s another way of saying, “Turn from your old ways and turn toward a new life of serving God and others.” Jesus’



baptism began his life of service, and he identified himself with those who were sick, homeless, poor, lonely, and seen as second class citizens. He undertook a life of service to these people and showed them that God loves them, too. In your baptism, Gage, God is calling you to reach out to others in a spirit of love and justice and mercy, as well.

Now on the Sunday we baptized you we heard just this point reiterated in a story about Zacchaeus. But Zacchaeus didn't start out being a model disciple. In fact, he was the exact opposite of a model disciple. He was a tax collector, a chief tax collector. But he turned from his corrupt ways after he met Jesus and ever since he's been a fan favorite among the Sunday School crowd and the IRS.

Zacchaeus was one of the wealthiest men in town because he made his living collecting taxes. He had the right to stop any person he wanted to and assess a tax on his or her possessions. A cart, for instance, could be taxed for each wheel, for the animal that pulled it, and for the merchandise that it carried. Why, that would be the equivalent of an IRS agent stopping someone at a red light and taxing them for every passenger, tire, grocery bags, or whatever other stuff they had in the car. Not only that, but the tax collector would have the right to keep whatever money was leftover after they sent in the proper amount to the government. You see, once Zacchaeus sent his portion of the tax to the Roman government, he got to keep whatever was left. No wonder he was so wealthy!

Life as a tax collector had its downside, though. See, they were considered some of the lowest of the low because of how they made their living, and they certainly didn't have many friends other than other tax collectors I suppose. They were what we would call sinners.

But word had gotten out that Jesus liked sinners, especially tax collectors. Considering this it's no wonder Zacchaeus climbed the sycamore tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. But still, I'm sure it came as quite a shock to Zacchaeus, lying on the branch of that sycamore tree, to hear Jesus say, "Zacchaeus, get down from there immediately. I must stay at your house today." Not I want to stay at your house or may I stay at your house, but I must stay at your house. Why I bet Zacchaeus jumped out of that tree.

Yet, in that split second, Zacchaeus could have turned down Jesus' invitation. Plenty of people do, Gage. It certainly would have been easier, and more

profitable, for Zacchaeus to have said no. Having the Son of God over for lunch is pretty risky business (if you ask me) because you're almost guaranteed he's going to ask you to do something you'd probably rather not do, like turn from your old ways of thinking and doing and believing to a new way of thinking and doing and believing. Now at 5 years old you might not think that's very hard to do, Gage. But as you get older it gets harder because we get stuck in our ways and, well, people can be difficult.

But Jesus doesn't always tell us what we want to hear. He doesn't always affirm what we already believe, either or tell us that what we're already doing is great. Sometimes, in fact more often than not, he afflicts the comfortable and comforts the afflicted, and if you're part of the comfortable that doesn't always feel so good. I mean, just look at the Pharisees in our story. They grumbled when Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for lunch, because they thought they were the ones who deserved to eat with Jesus. "How dare you eat with tax collectors and sinners," they said. It was a startling breach of etiquette for Jesus to invite himself to the chief tax collectors' home. But Jesus doesn't care; because Jesus welcomes everyone. That's an important lesson to hear, Gage. *Jesus welcomes all.* It's simple, but you'll find not everyone believes it. You'll find there are people like the Pharisees, who say they're righteous but do an awful lot of judging as to who is in and who is out. They say they're Christians but their actions don't always look like Jesus'.

Which gets me back to your baptism. Today isn't a one and done event. It's not enough to get sprinkled with water and go about your old ways and proclaim your "saved", as some Christians do. Gage, your life should show it. Zacchaeus clearly understood this when he says to Jesus "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." For Zacchaeus, being saved was no private matter. His household, the poor, and the people he defrauded will all benefit from his salvation. Indeed, his salvation has personal, domestic, social, and economic ramifications.

Zacchaeus no longer lives for himself. Now he lives for others. He could now see people in need whereas before he only saw people he needed to fleece. Granted it took a climb up a tree for him to get there, but that doesn't matter. What

matters is that from his new vantage point and time spent with Jesus his perspective has changed, and he has come to see others with the same eyes Jesus sees others.

And this is why Zacchaeus is more than a sweet story told in Sunday School about a short man who climbs a sycamore tree. It is a powerful story about one man's transformation from a life that was self-serving to a life that serves others and God has everything to do with it.

Gage, today in your baptism, Jesus has officially come to town, as it were. And he has an agenda: to seek and to save and to change the world one person at a time – and today, that person is you. So let me invite you in your life to climb a tree and watch to see what he is up to. But beware! Today isn't the only day he'll stop for you. There will be many times in your life he will stop beneath the tree where you sit . . . no matter how comfortable or complacent or secure or even immobile you may be. He will look at you and invite you down. . . down to fellowship with him, and down to the opportunity to be transformed – because everyone is in need of transformation no matter how long we've been baptized. Also know that it takes courage to get out of that tree, but the gift of transformation and new priorities are worth it.

Gage, I believe following God's call is the most important thing you can and will do with your life, because the world needs people like you to show the world God's love. And even though following God's call may inconvenience you, because it's not always easy to climb down a tree, try to remember that following God is your highest and primary purpose in life, because when you do that you will become God' hands and feet for compassion, God's voice for justice and mercy, God's arms for reconciliation, and God's heart for the hurting, the hungry, the weak, and the vulnerable.

I think that is a call worth following and I hope you do, too, Gage.

Gage, wherever you go, remember the grace of God and God's assurance that you belong to the God who created you, and that God is not simply a name, but a real being who lives within lives. God gave us all the sacrament of baptism today so that we might all be strengthened and reminded of God's grace and rededicate ourselves to being disciples of Christ.

Gage, may the Lord bless you and keep you, may the Lord be kind and gracious to you, and may the Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace today and every day.

Blessings,

Rev. Dr. Anne Bain Epling
Pastor/Head of Staff

A sermon delivered to Gage Andrew McGiffen on the occasion of his baptism at First Presbyterian Church of Fort Wayne (IN) on November 13, 2022.

