**Sermon**

**“Conversation As A Means of Grace”**

Central United Methodist Church of Monroe, North Carolina

July 19, 1987, revised September 2024

*Scripture: Luke 19:1-10*

We tend to look at life as a rather boring routine with ordinary people doing ordinary things in ordinary circumstances. We work all week just looking forward to the weekends or stay at home all year thinking that only our vacation or Christmas will be special. We often see multiple days and sometimes years with too few monumental highs.

In 1927 when orators delivered speeches at America’s whistlestops, one of the most famous was Russell Conwell, a veteran of the Civil War who was converted during battle and became a Baptist Minister. He later founded Temple University in Philadelphia and Conwell School of Theology. He is most famous for a speech called “Acres of Diamonds” that he delivered all over America 6934 times! The theme of the motivational speech was that with good character and hard work, any of us have “diamonds” under the ordinary dirt of our own back yard. One example was the farmers of western Pennsylvania who sold their farms and moved west because the cows would not drink from their branches of water. Later it was discovered that the water had oil seeping up from the ground. The farms they sold for a pittance later all had oil wells pumping wealth to their new owners day after day and year after year. Rev. Conwell’s point was that somewhere and with someone in our ordinary lives there is a great future. Beneath the surface of ordinary conversations there are acres of diamonds. In more times than the diamonds are items of wealth, the diamonds are people, people we meet and never really get to know. Either we are too busy, or they are not our “type.”

Helen Steiner Rice has captured that in one of her poems:

*“On life’s busy thoroughfares we meet angels unawares, but we are too busy to listen or hear*

*Too busy to sense that God is near, too busy to stop and see the grief in another’s eyes,*

*Too busy to offer to help or to share, too busy to sympathize or care.*

*Too busy to do the good things we should, telling ourselves that we would if we could.*

*But life is too swift, and the pace is too great, and we dare not pause for we might be late*

*For our next appointment which means so much that we’re willing to brush off the Savior’s own touch,*

*And we tell ourselves there will come a day when we have more time to pause on our way*

*But before we know it, life’s sun has set and we’ve passed the Savior, but we never met*

*For hurrying along life’s thoroughfare, we met him one day but remained unaware*

*That within the very sight of our eye, unnoticed, the Son of God passed by.*

*I wish you might meet him much more than you do. You can! He’s in more people like you!*

We most often in church portray Jeus in a very theological or deeply spiritual way that makes him out of touch with our ordinary lives. The theology is good and a necessary thing, but in the Gospels it’s a different Jesus they bring in his series of meetings with a “DEI” of people—rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, Palestinian and Roman, female and male, children and adults, fishermen and tax collectors, zealots and quislings slave and free, followers and enemies. With whomever Jesus met, he talked; he met them where they were; he saw through the surface into the depth of their souls.

This morning, we see Jesus riding into Jericho. It was only fifteen miles, but the altitude of Jerusalem is 2500 feet above sea level and the altitude of Jericho is 800 feet below sea level, a drop of 3300 feet in 15 miles! the “Palm Springs, California” of the Middle East, the most important crossing point of the Jordan River from Judea to the ancient land of Moab and today’s country of Jordan. Jericho was an oasis. They grew melons, bananas, dates, and olives. The Romans discovered Jericho and began to export its fruits throughout the Empire. It was a city of commerce and generated a lot of wealth.

A major position in the provinces of the Roman Empire was that of the tax collector. The man who had that position in Jericho was short in stature, brilliant in mind, shrewd in business, and therefore personally wealthy and hated by the local citizens. His name, as you know, was Zacchaeus. He had the reputation of collecting more tax money that Rome wanted so he could rake off any excess for himself. To the Jews he was a quisling, a betrayer of his own people. He had the same job in Jericho by the Dead Sea that Matthew had up in Capernaum on the Sea of Galilee.

Let’s look more closely at Zaccheus. He was a wealthy Jew, but lonesome since he was despised by his own people. Many people who are wealthy and powerful are also lonely. Basically, every human being has the same need for friends with whom they can bear their souls and share their problems. Jesus knew that whatever else Zaccheus was, he was a human being and therefore a child of God. Jesus saw him as a human being with personal needs.

Secondly, Zaccheus heard about the coming of Jesus to his town and he wanted at least to see him, but in the people who would line the streets, he would be too short to see the Galilean whose coming to town had generated a lot of curiosity. Local people and dignitaries have throughout history wanted to see famous visitors when they came to town. The story is true that when General William Booth who founded the Salvation Army died, two very different women ended up side by side at General Booth’s funeral. One was a prostitute whose dress revealed her reputation. Beside her was Queen Victoria, the reigning monarch of England. The queen said to the prostitute, “What brings you to General Booth’s funeral? The woman said in the Cockney accent of east Londoners, “Aye, he was a friend to our kind, you know.” And the queen said to the prostitute, “Aye, he was a friend to my kind too.” Jesus had that same gift. He was a friend to the down and weak and the up and strong. He was a friend of the poor and of the high and mighty. Jesus said of himself, using the third person, “The Son of Man can seek and save those who are lost.” The word lost used in that text does not mean damned and doomed for all eternity; it means people who have lost their way in life, bitter because they were poor or haughty because they were wealthy. Either way, they were lonely and had few friends.

You know the rest of the story. Jesus spotted this little man who had climbed a sycamore tree just by the street. Perhaps it was just his curiosity. Or perhaps he had heard enough about Jesus that he wanted to know more. Whatever his motive for being up in the tree, he must have been shocked when Jesus spotted him! Right out of blue, Jesus called his name and said, “Zaccheus, hurry and come down for I am going to stay at your house today.” (Luke 19:5) Oh my goodness, Zaccheus had to get home quickly and tell his housekeeper to prepare a meal for a dignitary! The people grumbled that Jesus was going home with Zaccheus.

We know nothing of their conversation, but we know a lot about the consequences. In the Bible the story sounds as if Zaccheus told about his sudden conversion before Jesus went to his home, but most Bible scholars think that they first had a conversation. Then Zaccheus said, “Half of my wealth I am going to give to the poor. Also, if as your tax collector I have defrauded any of you, I will repay you four times as much as I took from you beyond the legal tax codes.” And Jesus said to them, “Today, salvation has come to this man’s house. He too is a Jew. And then it was that Jesus revealed his mission—he had come to seek and to save anyone who had lost their way.

As I read that text over and over this week in preparing this sermon, I thought of the old saying, “Put your money where you mouth is.” Don’t just parade your reputation; put it into action. We all know people who talk a lot about their Christian beliefs and tell us when they were saved and are very critical of anyone who crosses the standard lines of morality and behavior. We all know Christian “gossips”. We know preachers who brush people off if they disagree with some sermon or church leadership action. In short, we all know of people who are active in church, but you don’t want to do business with them, or you will come out on the short end of the stick.

For all these reasons in the life of Jesus or in our own lives, conversations are a means of exclusion or inclusion. We leave them wanting never to have another interaction with that person or we leave them wanting to talk with this person again. I have looked back across the years of my ministry this week and remember the power of conversation as a means of grace. Really, talk that is backed up with truth and uncompromising integrity that is priceless. Every business deal and personal interaction, even those of great magnitude, begin with a conversation.

Let’s engage in more intentional conversation; it is a means of grace.