

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O God, our strength and our redeemer.
Amen.

Living in community can be a hard thing.

Over the summer I had the wonderful opportunity to travel to Israel and help uncover a byzantine synagogue at an archaeological site in a place called Huqoq up by the north west coast of the Sea of Galilee.

It was an amazing time.

Over the course of those five weeks I learned more things than I thought possible.

I learned about stratigraphy, paying attention to the lines in the dirt.

I learned the importance of documentation, because archaeology is destruction – once you've dug something up you can never see how it was again.

I got to see Byzantine-era mosaics that hadn't seen the light of day in over fifteen hundred years.

And I even found a largely intact piece of pottery on a later medieval floor and learned how, because of its position and composition, it will help scholars date when that medieval building went out of use.

I also got to meet students and professors from institutions around the world, including Yale Divinity School, the University of North Carolina, Brigham Young University, Slovakia, Malta, the Israeli Antiquities Authority.

And even folks from my hometown from the University of Toronto.

All told, we were over sixty people in various stages of life, from rising sophomores to tenured professors, all working and living together towards a common goal: a better understanding of the history of Huqoq.

Before I left for Israel, I contacted my friends who had worked at this site before and made sure I had all the necessary supplies:

Sturdy shoes, a proper hat, light cotton clothing, and more sunscreen than I've ever carried around before in my life – which is saying something given my ginger complexion.

What I wasn't prepared for, however, was how closely we would all be living together during the time we weren't at the site.

And while our accommodations were comfortable, they made for close quarters.

More often than not there were three people in rooms designed for two.

And most of our waking hours were spent sharing a small common courtyard.

It wasn't long before personality conflicts became apparent in that courtyard,

And by the beginning of the second week they were beginning to manifest at work as well.

There is one particular argument that stands out, and I'd seen it coming for a few days.

Nevertheless, when it *did* happen, I was surprised by the intensity of it, and the ways in which it affected people's relationships with one another in the weeks that followed.

And while the details of it aren't incredibly important,

It's clear that it sprang from confusion due to a lack of communication.

No one was trying to cause a problem, but a problem occurred all the same.

Living in community can be a hard thing, especially when that community isn't intentional. —

At the edge of our Gospel lesson this morning is another unintentional community, simply referred to as “the crowd.”

This crowd would most likely have been the Jewish community living in Jericho, united by their ethnicity which, in turn, led to a common set of religious and ethical practices.

Ostensibly, our story’s protagonist, Zacchaeus, would have been a part of this community as well – even if his status as chief tax-collector placed him on its periphery.

As you may recall from last week’s Gospel of the Pharisee and the tax collector, people with Zacchaeus’s profession were not highly regarded in first-century Jewish communities.

Tax collectors were seen as people who collaborated with an occupying power,

Their wealth and lack of moral fiber setting them apart from everyone else.

Yet Zacchaeus is among the many who came to see Jesus.

The news of Jesus’ teachings and miracles had clearly reached his ears and Zacchaeus wanted to see what all the fuss was about.

But more than this –

Zacchaeus didn’t simply want to see Jesus, he wanted “to see who Jesus was.”

Like so many of us, he didn’t just want an arm’s-length view of the Lord, but a close, intimate, and personal encounter.

But despite his willingness to be a part of the crowd, Zacchaeus was unable to get the view he wanted.

Now, much has been made about Zacchaeus's height, with some commentators suggesting that his short stature should actually be read as a comment on his profession –

His ethical shortcomings being manifested physically in his height – or lack thereof.

This, however, misses the point that is central to understanding this story.

Yes, Zacchaeus is short.

But his height is not the only problem here.

Zacchaeus is unable to see who Jesus is on account of the crowd.

That is to say, the only reason Zacchaeus is not able to meet Jesus is because his community prevents him from doing so.

This is a group so sure of themselves that they see nothing wrong with the exclusion of one of their members whom they happen not to agree with.

This is a community that exists in a world of extremes –

Where the saying “If you’re not with us you’re against us” is the only truth that matters.

This is community done poorly.

Zacchaeus, however, isn’t about to let that stop him.

Undeterred by the crowd’s desire to prevent him from meeting Jesus, Zacchaeus runs ahead and climbs a sycamore tree, its low-lying branches providing the perfect aid to help him climb as high as he needs.

And Jesus, who was only planning on passing through the town, and who is always one to subvert the expected societal norms, calls up to the man in the tree:

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

Jesus scandalizes the crowd with this request, but it should come as no surprise to those of us familiar with Luke's Gospel.

In Luke, Jesus is always welcoming the outsider, those who have been forgotten or excluded by society at large.

Like Zacchaeus, Jesus knows us and calls us by name, even before we know the slightest thing about him.

And when we welcome him happily, as Zacchaeus does, we become a part of a larger Christ-centred community.

It is *this* kind of community – community done well – that is addressed in the second letter to the Thessalonians.

For the letter's author, a perfect faith was nothing less than every member of the community growing in love for each other, despite their individual pasts.

Whatever you were before, it doesn't matter, because now we're together with Jesus as our centre.

The church in Thessaloniki was very different than the one we know today, and not just because of the intervening two thousand years.

Though the details have been lost to history, the church there was undergoing some kind of persecution – and the opening of this letter commends the church's ability to remain steadfast in their faith despite this.

Today, however, the church isn't the persecuted institution it once was.

And though it may not exercise the power it has in the past, it still maintains much of its privilege.

As our status in society changes, so too does our calling from God.

The question is no longer "how do we survive persecution," but "what do we do with the privilege we possess?"

Moreover, how do we respond to those who only look inward and use the name of Jesus Christ for their own, personal gain?

I think we have an answer for this in the story of Zacchaeus.

When the hegemony of the society got between him and seeing who Jesus was, he climbed that tree and became an example for anyone else who might be looking for Jesus.

We live in a world that is filled with the pain of separation and injustice we can't explain.

Just this week, several of the individuals who occupied the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon earlier this year were acquitted of any crime.

Compare this to the systemic racial injustice that necessitates the need for the Black Lives Matter movement, to the people of the Standing Rock reservation who face armed resistance as they try to defend not only their land, but their right to clean water, and to the Haida people of northern British Columbia who are trying prevent pipeline construction in their traditional territory.

When we see that pain, we might be tempted, like Habakkuk, to declare that the law has become slack and that justice never prevails.

The calling of the Christian community is to be an antidote to that pain, and to be a beacon of hope in times of injustice.

One of the ways we do that is here at our table, where we share a meal in remembrance that Christ died for each and every one of us.

Not just the people already on the inside.

To invite the outsider to share a meal at this table announces our equality before God.

It is an equality that scandalizes those in power, and empowers those who have been neglected.

So when we see injustice that affects every member of the body of Christ, It's up to us to name it.

To be like the prophet who writes a vision so plainly that someone running by can read it.

And to be like Zacchaeus who, despite the best efforts of the crowd, climbed a tree in order that he might better see who Jesus is.

Amen.