

Consensus

Volume 42
Issue 2 *Living through COVID-19, looking
beyond COVID-19*

Article 15

7-25-2021

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Recommended Citation

Bandara, Janaki (2021) "Jesus Never Passes Us By!," *Consensus*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 2 , Article 15.
Available at: <https://scholars.wlu.ca/consensus/vol42/iss2/15>

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Jesus Never Passes Us By!

Janaki Bandara¹

Text: Luke 19:1–10

I have always loved this story of Zacchaeus, the short tax collector who wants so badly to see Jesus, who is so disliked by the people because he was, scholars believe, party to the unjust and oppressive taxation system that prevailed over the Roman Empire at the time. He had no anticipation of communing with Jesus, just was driven to climb a sycamore tree to catch a glimpse of him.

Maybe sometimes our own Sunday worship is like this. We bring our most human selves, falling literally short of the glory of God, and we climb the Sunday worship tree just to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he passes by. But Jesus never passes us by!

We might be all bent out of shape and stuck in a tree of our own creation, like a cat that has crawled too far, now needing a fireman to get us back down safely. But Jesus never passes us by! He comes to the tree, and he says to each one of us: “Come down, walk with me; today is my day to be a guest in your home.” It is not a request. It is an instruction. But it is a very unusual instruction ... today is my day to be a guest in your home.

When we think “guest” we tend to think of ourselves as the hosts. We invite. The guest responds to an invitation. Jesus, however, is able to see that our stuckness itself is his invitation. And he does not wait for us to be unstuck – he doesn’t wait for Zacchaeus to change from his crooked ways; he doesn’t require the households of our souls to be clean or the attics of our hearts to be opened and swept out for him. He finds us up the tree of our own humanity, and he responds, “Come on down; today I will be a guest in your heart, in your soul.”

We are not worthy. But Jesus joins us anyway. We are not ready to share our households, but Jesus comes in anyway. And so it is that we encounter the story of two homeless young boys, who come from less than 100% healthy home situations, seeking their way into a home that they have not been invited into.

Last Sunday, I shared an article in worship: it threw down a challenge for us to open our homes to those who need shelter. I was so very thankful to those of you who responded to me, by email, on Zoom, by phone and otherwise, to say, “Pastor, that is not as simple as you made it sound.” And you are right.

There are many considerations to be made. Safety being probably the first of them. Our capacity as individuals to support the diverse needs of people who may be homeless – that is another concern. Most of us have no knowledge or training in how to support someone who might have needs vastly different from our own. Some of us have had relatives or friends with deep mental health challenges stay with us, and we know the impact it can have even on our ability to complete day-to-day functions.

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The point I am making is that there is a very real tension ... some of you named it to me ... the tension between our call as disciples to feed the hungry and house the homeless, and the fact that, like Zacchaeus, our households, the households of our very souls, are not ready, not yet equipped. We are like the Kingdom of God itself – *almost* but *not yet*.

The point of my challenge to you, and I will say the point I was trying to draw from Anya's article in the Canada Lutheran, was to ask the question:

how are you willing,
or are you even willing,
to have Jesus be a guest in your home?

The home of your heart, the home of your soul, where the messiness of our humanity and fear of death and scarcity co-exist, where past experiences of hurt and lack co-exist with a sometimes threadbare fabric of faith ... we may be willing to climb the tree, to get a peek, but it is with surprise that we encounter Jesus' willingness to enter this inhospitable territory. Are you, are we, ready to have Jesus be our guest?

The incredible thing about God's grace with us is that God does not wait for us to be ready.

Jesus is the willing guest into the mess.
Jesus doesn't need our abundance. But we need His.
Jesus doesn't need our readiness to let him in. But we need His readiness to enter.

And we need the initiative that Jesus takes with us. That initiative is transformative. That initiative, the Jesus initiative, burns a hot fire that melts down the concealment:

of ego and pride,
of saviour complex and victim complex,
of the haves and have nots,
bringing to bear a pure, Kingdom form of love whose fingerprints are justice, whose DNA is compassion, whose very lifeblood is forgiveness, mercy, and grace.

So it is that we move from the practical needs and wants, the tensions of Jesus' gospel teaching "feed them," to Jesus' desire to be our guest and show us the way from the inside out.

I don't have the answers to all the hows – how do we meet these needs with safety in mind, how do we work around our own fears and discomforts which have a good, sound basis – I don't have all the answers, not by far. But what I do have is the desire to climb the tree, the desire to see Jesus – and a complete faith and trust that, as he did with Zacchaeus, he will do with me, with each and every one of us, and despite our unpreparedness, despite our unreadiness, he will be with us as we journey.

Thanks be to God.