Sermon on All Saints 2019 (Luke 19:1-10)

I was listening to an interview with a blind person and it was fascinating how many times she used words that focused on sight.

“I see” she said several times; “when I go out to see my friends” she said later on. What may have been just a quirk of language for this person is actually something we all experience; we “see” our thoughts, our sentences are created from images in our mind.

For those of you who have tried or presently practice contemplative prayer, you know that it is the flood of thoughts as images that can frustrate us.

On the creepier side, scientists from Cambridge have been doing research trying to discover if human beings have the fabled sixth sense, the “sense of being stared at,” which seems to be stronger in children but fades as we get older.

Some who believe in this sixth sense hypothesize that the human mind’s reach is not confined to the brain cavity, this because of the electromagnetic field that surrounds our brains, giving our brains “a reach” beyond what our eyeballs take in.

Whether it’s true or not, and the experiments have been inconclusive so far, it’s a nice segue into the Gospel reading today and the Feast of all Saints.

All Saints is the feast in which we celebrate Christians who in various ways have “seen things” impossible with physical eyes, they’ve “glimpsed God.” That’s why the traditional way to portray the saints is with large eyes; an example of that can be found on the front of your bulletin this morning.

The theology behind this metaphor is that anyone who “sees,” “encounters,” comes to “know” God will have encountered Someone so wonderful that their life will demonstrate great love and great service, the effect of which never fades.

It is, as one of the four principal feasts of the Church alongside Christmas, Easter and Pentecost, the only one of the four where the emPHAsis is on the effect of God’s action in ordinary people outside of Jesus.

In this respect it’s the great feast of hope for a cynical world; it’s as if our cynical culture has embraced only half of the biblical perspective: everyone, whether politicians, religious leaders, teacher, those working in the justice system are all viewed as fundamentally out for self-interest; only out to spin a story, to manipulate facts and look out for #1.

On this day we celebrate the fact (not too strong a word for what we celebrate is a matter of public record) that the Holy Spirit has acted in the lives of the Saints so that they chose to bring aid to the needy, justice to the oppressed, hope to the sorrowful and the divine word of forgiveness to all.

But, what about us? Are saints special people who, in virtue of their gift of seeing, inaccessible as inspirations for you and I? As we know, we admire people’s triumphs and successes but that’s not yet what makes us love them, feel connected to them; we love others for their vulnerabilities and this because we can identify with them in their weaknesses.

Today’s gospel reading helps us to understand the line we will say in the Apostle’s Creed in a few minutes, “the communion of the saints” from *this* perspective.

“Perspective” refers to sight, a way to see, a way to understand what it is that unites the Saints and gives us hope that it’s not too late for us to “glimpse God.”

We are introduced to Zacchaeus. Perhaps he resides innocently in your mind, the residue of a Sunday School lesson: the short guy who climbed a tree to get a look at Jesus.

But Luke tells us he’s actually the chief tax collector; most tax collectors were the equivalent of toll booth operators, skimming money from those hauling goods back and forth on Palestinian roads, kind of like an ancient GST.

Zacchaeus is their boss. As such he’s doubly despised by the Jewish people. Worse, Luke notes that he’s rich; he’s rich on the backs of the hard-working folk who don’t know if they’ll make it month to month.

Luke foregrounds these aspects of Zacchaeus’ vocation and wealth but it’s not all he wants us to see; he wants us to see what this has done to Zacchaeus.

Sometimes you and I get trapped in a line of work that we don’t feel that great about. We don’t know how Zacchaeus came to his work; if he felt pushed into it initially and then made the most of it or some other route.

What we do know is that to do such things makes you an outsider, an outsider to your own people, that’s the devil’s bargain; he might have a lot of money but can he spend it with the people he loves? Are there people that love *him?*

Luke also describes his physical limitations, probably not just to describe his need to climb the tree but as the kind of thing that helps explain his “claw to get to the top” character.

And sometimes when we want something so bad and then get it, we realize we’ve sold our soul to get it and it’s not that satisfying!

What Luke is fronting is the role of regret, that feeling that we get when we say, “wait a minute, this money, this pursuit, this dalliance, this distraction, has brought me the happiness I thought it would and the years are slipping by!”

We pick up something of this regret, this desperation even, when we see Zacchaeus climb the tree to see Jesus. What kind of sight is this?

We know it’s not a voyeuristic curiousity because a public official with his type of notoriety would do almost anything to stay under the radar. For now he’s truly vulnerable, not only to name-calling but stones or worse.

But Zacchaeus *needs to see,* needs to risk limb and life to cultivate a spiritual seeing; the itch to the eyes of his soul has become so bad that he’ll do anything to remove the scales!

He needs to see because the pressure on his soul has become unbearable. That pressure is exerted when, paradoxically, we come to understand that the purpose of life isn’t to be happy; it is, as Ralph Waldo Emerson said, “to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well.”

Emerson’s assertion is borne out in the gospels; happiness is a by-product of participating in a deeper purpose; it is precisely those who are willing to have their needs, their vulnerabilities known in openness to this deeper purpose who experience the happiness of the Kingdom of God in a fresh way.

We don’t know exactly what happens next, perhaps Jesus experiencs the sense of being stared at; or he may have known of Zacchaeus by reputation and found it all-telling that he was up a tree; whatever the case, when he comes to the tree he “looked up.”

Here too was a look that communicates so much more than curiosity, here indeed is that grandest of sight: the desire to be with, to know, to love: “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

There is no doubt that Zacchaeus has lived an oppressive life but to seek God in the face of Jesus Christ means that his sins and mistakes need not be the final descriptor of his life.

Many of the saints we celebrate today from the Old Testament saints down through someone like St. Paul and then down through Church history have lived oppressive and often violent.

And in their misery they heard God call their name, Zacchaeus! And what is true for Zacchaeus is surely true for us.

As we allow our vulnerability to show, we find that God sees, that God has not been looking at us with judgement but with invitation! We find that God cares; we find that God focuses, not on all the bad, but on what we are and what we might yet be!

At some point in the meal Zacchaeus stand up and makes his amazing announcement about giving half his wealth to the poor and repaying anyone he’s defrauded 4x.

Salvation has come here, Jesus says. Salvation is justice, for us, being put right, and now the greatest privilege of our lives, helping others be put right.

Christ breaks bread with us and justice breaks out in the world: that’s probably the best definition of Eucharist that I know!

It’s how we know that we’ve glimpsed God; it’s how we know that we too participate in the communion of the saints: our vulnerability the very crack that lets the light in and the very opening in our hearts through which the love Christ births in us can be expressed! Amen.