WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE ME DO FOR YOU?

They don’t have far to go anymore. Maybe 20 miles or so… a tough walk though up to Jerusalem, all the way up hill – more than a 3000-foot climb. But tough also, because Jesus just told them for the third time about his impending death – in no uncertain terms the suffering he would have to endure, and then how he will rise up again. Jesus knows what is coming as they track to the hornet’s nest of the Roman Empire – his eyes are wide open.

The problem is that those with him, his closest confidants, still don’t understand. They cannot see or get their minds wrapped around it. Was it that they couldn’t believe that something like that would happen? Were they afraid that it might happen? Was it maybe that their idea of a Messiah looked much different than Jesus’? It is always easier to deny those things that are unpleasant – to play ostrich or to ignore the elephant in the room and walk your way around it.

Strange then, that they hushed the blind man on the road. This man who was marginalized and ostracized – a beggar who probably deserved what came his way. Not worth calling out to Jesus… This man who tries to find a place to curl up and get a little rest every night after he lost his sight and finally his house. This guy who lives in hopelessness that anything good can still happen, who has lost all dignity in the begging for his daily food. He tasted the dust kicked up at him every day from those who looked at him with disdain, maybe tossing a coin or two his way.

He sat, day after day on the busy corner in the city – close by a bar with some outdoor space. He could hear the big screen television with the news… the news about the increased division and hatred in the country, about patriotism and nationalism. But then, sometimes intertwined with this, was these stories of a fellow named Jesus who talked about a different kind of kingdom. When health insurance prices sky-rocketed, Jesus was doing healings, without asking a penny. When people were talking how they feared the caravans of migrants at the border, this Jesus was reaching out to marginalized people like him.

And on just another day, there was a stirring that was different in the crowds around him, as he heard a collective voice coming down the street, calling “Jesus, Jesus, Jesus!” Could it be? Could it really be? This Jesus-guy who turned the world upside down was here? He just knew that this was his chance. Something inside of him took control of his body as he jumped up, knowing that this was the only chance he had.

Afterwards he would think about how this might not have been the smartest move, given the circumstances in the country at the time, but he found himself yelling from the corner: “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy!” All he wanted was to be healed, but the people shushed him quickly. Was it because what he was yelling was a dangerous and seditious political declaration that heralds Jesus as the Messiah and heir to the throne of David? Were they afraid of being killed? Or was it just the same old stuff – he was not worthy to talk to someone the likes of Jesus? Against everything inside himself, struggling with the nagging voice, now familiar, saying he is not worthy, he finds himself yelling again.

And he hears the crowd stop, and a kind voice asking that he be brought to Jesus. Someone pulls him up by the arm and maneuvers him through the crowd. And he hears the voice: “What do you want me to do for you?” What else, Jesus, but that I can see. To be healed… to ultimately be made whole. Because in seeing, his life will be restored – restored to be able to support himself, face life with dignity, walk away from the street corner. He has nothing to lose. And Jesus talks, and the light enters. It blinds him as he looks at the smudges of color. Red – a lady’s purse. Green – the street name written in white. Blue – he cannot believe the sky ever being so bright. He knows that Jesus said “go” – return to his life, but how can he now – the only thing he can do is follow. Follow with the crowd now glorifying God with him, unified in their praise and adoration. Community restored by the sight of a blind man.

And so, we follow Jesus into Jericho. A booming city, a place where Herod built a palace, where many of the aristocracy lived. Zaccheus lived a good live here, had more money than he could spend in a lifetime. And yet something was missing. He too was ostracized. He too was marginalized – hated to be sure. He was a tax collector, working for the oppressive regime of the Roman Empire. He was thought to defraud his own people in collecting their hateful taxes. And he too wished to see… to see Jesus. In fact, he is so desperate to see that he humiliates himself in an effort to see over the crowd, to get away from the punches and kicks thrown his way, that he runs and climbs a tree like a child. He risks looking like an idiot in order to see further and more clearly.

He soon finds out that the one seeking was also sought after as Jesus looks up and calls him down, by name: “Zacchaeus, come down; for I must stay at your house today.” There is both intentionality and urgency in Jesus’ summons. A summons from this Jesus who sides with those on the margin, those considered down and out, those not accounted as much in the eyes of the world. While Zacchaeus is rich, he is nevertheless despised by his neighbors, counted as nothing, even as worse than nothing.

But what if that wasn’t true? True that he is a crook? When Zacchaeus learns that Jesus wants to dine at his house, he is happy to welcome him, but the crowd murmurs against him. Just like the Pharisees and scribes were grumbling about Jesus’ dining and hanging out with sinners and tax collectors (Luke 15:2).

For the first time in a long time, Zaccheus feels that he can defend himself – now that he has been noticed. He turns to Jesus, and says: “Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much”, vindicating himself against the crowd, trying to explain that he is different from their assumptions… It’s possible to read Zacchaeus’ statement this way: “Jesus, you hear the nasty things these people say about me, but look—I already give away half of everything I have to the poor. And if anyone can show me that I’ve cheated them, I return four times as much. I’m an honest man, Lord, in spite of what they say.”

To me, it seems, that the use of the Greek present tense in Zacchaeus’ statements means that this commitment is ongoing, not something he will start doing now that Jesus noticed him, but that he may have already been doing these things. And yet, they assumed…

Just like Mary who sits at Jesus’ feet and the blind man, Zaccheus becomes part of Jesus’ entourage – outsiders on the margins, seeking, sought after and let in. In fact, people who seek Jesus tend to find that it was actually Jesus who was seeking them all along. It embodies the promise that anyone — *anyone*! — who desires to see Jesus will. More than that, anyone who desires to see Jesus will, in turn, be seen by Jesus and in this way have their joy made complete.

In his collection of essays, *The* *Weight of Glory*, C.S Lewis writes: “It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations. It is in the light of these overwhelming possibilities, it is with the awe and the circumspection proper to them, that we should conduct all our dealings with one another, all friendships, all loves, all play, all politics. There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal."

That, to me, begs the question, what do we see when we look at others? How do we see ourselves and those around us? Where do we get in the way, silencing people, or towering over them? Do we see them as unworthy? Not one of us? Who have been left on the margins, ruled out of bounds, or even who might surprise us by their generosity and faith? Who just want to see Jesus and have been kept at bay?

I know in myself, that I do the same – hold people hostage to versions of themselves that might be more in line with my perceptions. I do it when I turn on the news and see 6 AAPI women killed in Atlanta, when police don’t seem to care for lives of black and brown men, when children at the border are treated like criminals, or if someone’s view of the world is “different” than mine. It’s easier that way, because then I don’t have to change.

“What do you want me to do for you, Jesus asks. And if our answer is to see, then we should be ready to have our worlds turned upside down. Because to see like Jesus, is to see the marginalized as worthy, the hated as loved, and those I disagree with bringing their own unique gifts. Then my faith will call me to see people I have deliberately refused, as God sees them. And when that happens, everything changes. Because then shalom – wholeness – is restored, and we cannot do anything but follow Jesus, all the way new life. But the only way to get there, to get to Easter Sunday, is through Jerusalem, through giving up our right to ourselves… to live, and die, as Jesus did.