

“No Tricks, Just Treats”

Luke 19:1010

The Rev. Cathy Russell October 31, 2010

How do we get Halloween

The traditions of Halloween are somewhat shrouded in mystery- although there are definite connections to a Celtic celebration known as Samhain (Sow-in) which translates roughly as Summer’s End.

Halloween has become increasingly popular over the last few years. They even celebrate on the other side of the Atlantic now, although not when we lived there as young children. Halloween’s popularity can be partially explained because it is a secular holiday- an excuse to have fun period- without any other greater purpose. And partly because pretending to be someone else, stepping outside of our everyday identity if only for one night comes with a small thrill of freedom. Dressing up allows us to subvert others expectations and images of us, it gives us an excuse to act a little differently from what people normally anticipate. You know me as a mild mannered dentist but for tonight I am the personification of violent anger- the HULK. It’s nice to have a break, even a pretend break from those roles we must play every other day of our lives, from the image that others have formed of who we are and what we are about.

Zacchaeus Is Caught Up in The Role of Tax Collector

Zacchaeus was in a role that was more or less universally despised by the Jews, of which he was one. Although tax collectors worked for Rome, they were not paid by Rome, so their own income was based on the fee they charged on top of what they were obligated to hand over to the state. As long as the Empire got its money, they were not concerned with what the tax collectors were making on the side. You can imagine, then what an incentive this was for tax collectors to play tricks on the taxpayers. Tricks that allowed the tax collectors to gouge them out of far more money than the Roman law required. You can also imagine how their fellow Jews would have despised them for it, especially since exploitive financial dealings, including the charging of interest on loans was explicitly prohibited by God’s law. Tax collectors were by definition collaborators, cheats and liars, those who profited from the oppression of their own people, and it’s not surprising that their own people rejected them.

Luke tells us that Zaccaheus was a chief tax collector and that he was wealthy- well that wealth can only have been gained through tricky methods. If he walks like a trickster, talks like a trickster and tricks like a trickster, well then a trickster he must surely be. Zacchaeus was caught in a role- a role he helped create for himself, a role that had become a kind of prison.

We Are Caught Up in the Role of Consumers

We might not think that we have a lot in common with Zacchaeus today, but nearly all of us know what it's like to be caught up in a role, even though this role doesn't carry with it the same kind of community condemnation that tax collector did for Zaccaheus- far from it. Practically from the time we are born, we are defined and targeted as consumers- those who must fill our needs not just for survival but for self-worth, for a sense of identity and belonging from the things we purchase, and particularly from the brand names behind those purchases. Our senses and our consciousness are constantly bombarded with marketing campaigns of varying degrees of subtlety. I remember feeling a true chill down my spine in a grocery/hardware store in northern Ontario when I saw two toys- one was a plastic Automated Teller Machine and the other was one of those miniature sized shopping carts with the cheerful yellow sign proudly identifying the cart pusher as a "Jr. Customer.". One on level, I find that innocent looking little cart and its insidious message far more frightening than any horror movie filled with zombies. I mean just think about it for a minute four year olds are being told already that they are what they buy, or to mangle a phrase borrowed from Descartes "I shop, therefore I am". And it works- boy does it ever- and what's the result- well a heck of a lot of consumption- consumption as a kind of addiction, consumption as a replacement for religion, for meaning, for relationships, for community. Consumption that is destroying our planet, exploiting our brothers and sisters around the world, and giving us a cheap sense of what it means to be living the good life. If we walk like consumers, talk like consumers, shop like consumers and spend like consumers, then consumers we must surely be. Like Zacchaeus, we too are caught in a role- a role we have helped create for ourselves, a role that has become a kind of prison.

Was Zacchaeus tired of his role- surely despite the money he had made, there must have been times when he felt the burden of being despised and rejected by his own people. Perhaps that was why he was so anxious to seek out Jesus of Nazareth, because this fellow might just be different. Word on the street was that Jesus did not avoid outcasts like him, in fact there's even a rumour that he

called a tax collector named Levi to be one of his disciples. At any rate, when Jesus comes to his town, obscured by a crowd of followers, Zacchaeus climbs a tree in order to see him more clearly. As it turns out, not only does Zacchaeus see Jesus clearly, Jesus also sees him clearly as well. He knows Zacchaeus' name so he must also know he's a tax collector, but he sees past that role, to the human being underneath. Jesus sees Zacchaeus. He does not accuse him or shame him, instead he invites himself to Zacchaeus' home. I wonder, given his role as hated chief tax collector, how long had it been since Zacchaeus had a Jewish guest- or any guest for that matter stay in his home?

Jesus Recognises There is More to Zacchaeus

Jesus saw past Zacchaeus' reputation, past his money, past his tricks, past the hated role of chief tax collector to the human being inside- a human being longing for genuine relationship. A human being longing to be released from his role in life, a role he had a hand in making for himself, but a role that had become a kind of prison. Jesus sees what no one else can see, that inside this chief tax collector is a good man, an honest man, a generous man wanting to get out. For Zacchaeus the trickster, Jesus offers no tricks, only the treat of freedom- freedom that comes from the gracious liberating love of God. Once Jesus sees him and claims a place in his home, that role of hated chief tax collector has no hold on him anymore. Jesus frees Zacchaeus, frees him from the life of cheating and lying and getting rich through tricking others. Frees him from the judgement and condemnation and hatred of the world. Jesus frees Zacchaeus, frees him to make amends for the tricks he has played in the past, free to be lavishly generous with his ill-gotten fortune, free to finally love his neighbour as himself, free to treat the poor instead of tricking them. Jesus frees him to a sense of purpose and renewed self-worth

Jesus offers us this kind of freedom as well. Jesus sees right past our role as consumer- consumer of brands, consumer of the planet, consumer of the future- a role we have had a hand in making, but a role that has turned into a kind of prison. Jesus sees past all our possessions, our money, our acquisitiveness and our wastefulness, to the people we really are- the generous people longing for relationship just waiting to get out. And when Jesus claims us, when Jesus claims a place in our lives and our hearts, the role of consumer, that role the market has been grooming us for since we first came into this world, that role has no hold on us anymore.

Jesus Frees us from Consumerism

Jesus frees us from the tricks of the advertising mantras, frees us from the need to define ourselves by our bank accounts our address and what's parked in our driveway, frees us from the tyranny of "I shop therefore I am." We are free, free to be truly joyfully generous to our neighbours- and yes, I'll say it- free to be truly joyfully generous to our church, which is charged with sharing this message of true freedom in Christ. Because my friends if we don't share it who will? Apple? Calvin Klein, Volkswagon, Jenny Craig? I don't think so. Do we want to allow "I shop therefore I am" to become the only way for people to understand themselves and their relationship to the world?

God's free gift of unconditional love, frees us from that lie, and it *is* a lie. God's free gift of unconditional love frees us, frees us to make sacrifices for the sake of the planet, frees us to find our true identity in the word Christian rather than in the words Ford or Whirlpool or Macintosh or Samsung. That's what God in Christ offers us-the freedom to be the people we were created to be, freedom to live a life open to God and open to our neighbours. That's what God in Christ has to offer us, and that offer is the message we share with the world- a world that desperately needs to hear it over and over again. God has set you free. In the Christian life there are no tricks, just treats, thanks be to God, AMEN