

“A Life-changing Experience”

Sermon on Sunday, November 2, 2025

Dear church,

Here is a phrase that is frequently overused. “I had a life-changing experience.” Someone comes back from a magnificent trip and exclaims, “It was wonderful! Life-changing.” And if you are like me you want to ask, “Well how has your life changed since that trip to Hawaii?” Pastors tend to ask those pesky questions. Don’t worry, I won’t ask this morning. Or maybe I should... Can you name one life changing experience?

We can probably come up with one or a few more, but not too many. That’s because most changes in life occur slowly, over long periods of time, almost unnoticeable. They creep in. One day you have a strand of grey hair, then a few weeks later another fellow, bereft of color, has the audacity to appear on your crown and before you know it, you have turned silver. It’s a ten-year life-changing experience, let me tell you, I know what I’m talking about! Or, on a more sad note, consider this... When a relationship turns sour, people can sometimes trace it to one particular event; more often though, it happens over time, as much by what you say to one another as by what you don’t say to one another. And finally, consider this... becoming a father or a mother surely is a life-changing experience, right? But the thing about children and family is... they keep changing, and before you know it, your kids start telling you what to do! Is it not true?

So, while most changes in life happen slowly, incrementally over time, while our faith evolves quietly for the most part, we may also experience those rare moments which are radically life-changing. It may be a fateful encounter with a person who will be very important in your life and career. It may be a mind-expanding epiphany. A God-moment. A near death experience. Or something like the gospel for today.

A true life-changing story is described in Luke 19. This beautiful story embodies the gospel in multiple dimensions. The main protagonist experiences salvation on several levels: individually, communally, spiritually, mentally. It’s a story about a man who was rich but also poor, isolated, maligned, lonely.

But first let us address the elephant in the room... How many of us can correctly pronounce his name??? Let us simply call him “Mr. Z,” the tax collector. Mr. Z. was not on the ballot on election day; he was not voted in by the people; and he had been highly unpopular forever. The tax collectors at the time were appointed by the occupation power and viewed at best with suspicion, at worst

as traitors and enemies of the people. They found themselves in a terrible bind. On the one hand, they were happy to have a paying job. On the other hand, Rome didn't pay them much and expected them to charge a little extra to make ends meet, further poisoning their standing in the community. Tax Collectors were the most hated professionals at the time.

In Mr. Z. case, other circumstances contributed to his bad standing. He wasn't just any tax collector; he was the chief tax collector of the city of Jericho. He had made money over the years, quite a bit, and probably overcharged frequently. And people said, "He brought it upon himself." What's more, in contrast to his lofty position, he was a tiny fellow. And what do people do when they don't like someone and that person happens to be filthy rich and they can find things in their appearance to make fun of? They draw cartoons. They make jokes. They distort further and exaggerate with abandon... AS a result, Mr. Z. in our gospel lesson was a lonely man, isolated from the community, reliant on his family and inner strength. He was living in a golden cage, but a golden cage remains a cage. It's suffocating...

The encounter with Jesus that day changes his life. It starts with someone seeing him in his hiding space. It's easier to change when someone notices you, sees you and has an understanding of your struggles. It's easier to change when people are on your side. Jesus sees Mr. Z. and recognizes the terrible trap he is in. He calls him down, calls his name, calls him to join the people. And in true Jesus fashion, he invites himself to the shunned man's house for dinner... Jesus was always hungry it seems. He was hungry to get people together, which can be very hard, sometimes nowhere more so than in small communities or in families. Family, the cocoon that is meant to protect us, sometimes can turn hostile, judgmental, unkind, poisonous. Jesus was hungry to get people together, to overcome those barriers and in that sense, this is a story of salvation not for Mr. Z. alone but for the whole city of Jericho and its Jewish family. Nowhere is that emphasized more than in Jesus' proclamation: "This man, too, is a son of Abraham (like all of you!). For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Perhaps we too can be life-changers sometimes, by seeing someone, by recognizing their struggles and inviting them to fellowship, human interaction, food, communion, even holy communion, inviting them to come out of isolation. How hungry are we to get people together? I'm starving.

Amen.