



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

THE TWENTIETH SUNDAY
AFTER PENTECOST
OCTOBER 30, 2022

A Homily by the Rev. Jo P. Popham

“the minimum becomes the maximum”

In one of my former lives, I was the legal regulatory advisor for children's programming in CBS's Washington, D.C., office. It was 1993, and I was attending a hearing on Capitol Hill to determine the amount of educational children's programming met the standard of serving the public trust. It was being held in the Rayburn Building where the House of Representative's subcommittee on telecommunications was hearing testimony. Ed Markey was chairman and ranking member of that committee, and his elementary school teacher spoke to the needs of children. I met her in the elevator, along with two very influential industry leaders who were slated to testify that day. It was serendipity that I was in the elevator with Kermit the Frog and Lambchop. Kermit sat on my shoulder and kissed my cheek. Shari Lewis offered her written testimony, but asked if Lambchop could speak. And she did. Lambchop is the only hand puppet in history to testify before Congress, an honor she shares with Jim Henson's hand-rod puppets Kermit and Elmo.

Finally in 1997 after many hearings and testimonies the Federal Communications Commission's regulation was published requiring at

least three hours of educational and informational programming for children each week on local broadcast television stations. The programs were to be regularly scheduled and be at least 30 minutes in length and be labeled E/I (Educational and Informational) so that parents could identify their content. (And I think so that children could just as easily those shows as a pariah programs.) Surely that was not the intent of Congress or the FCC. Neither was it their intent to exclude exceptionally good programming that was already being aired. But that was an unintentional consequence of the regulations. ABC's Schoolhouse Rock programs were only three minutes, and they were brilliant educational pieces of interstitial programming that taught grammar and science and economics and history and math and civics. The original series ran from 1973 to 1984 but was revived from 1993 to 1996 and abruptly stopped being aired when the new regulation requiring 30 minute programs took effect. I can still sing "Conjunction Junction, what's your function?" and our children know all the presidents' names in order of their service and all the states (alphabetically) and their capitals from watching ABC Schoolhouse Rock. My stations like KDKA in Pittsburgh, who were producing and airing more than 4 ½ hours of original children's educational programming began airing only 3 hours in 1997. This was a classic representation of the minimum becoming the maximum.

What if anything do my experiences with children's television regulations have to do with Jesus's trip through Jericho? Well, in my sanctified imagination a great deal.

Jericho was a very wealthy city, known far and wide for its forests of palm and balsam trees and the export of dates and the center of some of the highest taxation in all of Palestine.¹ It was a perfect venue for the lucrative job of as tax collector like Zacchaeus. He was quite rich, but not at all happy, not in small part because his ill-gotten wealth. He was lonely. He was an outcast because of his chosen vocation. He was at the top of his profession and yet was the most hated man in all of Jericho.² He so wanted to see Jesus. He wanted the assurance that someone – that God – loved him. But he was short. We all remember the little song about Zacchaeus from Sunday School.

Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted
to see.

And when the Savior passed that way, he said:
Zacchaeus, you come down, for I going to your house
today.

It's not easy being short. (It wasn't easy being tall either until the young men caught up with me in height.) Just like "It's not easy being green" as my Kermit the Frog sings. For Zacchaeus had to spend each day short and subject to the jeers and abuses of his fellow

Jews in Jericho every day. Had he not climbed up in that tree just to catch a glimpse of Jesus, he would have been black and blue from being shoved and kicked by those in the crowd that he had over-taxed.

Zacchaeus the tax collector who worked for the Romans, Zacchaeus the outcast in Jewish society, never would have deigned to invite Jesus to his home. But Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus's home. And the crowd grumbled, because good people didn't associate with sinners like a tax collector. A faithful Jew would never accept a dinner invitation to the home of a Gentile or a sinner! But Jesus invited himself and ate with Zacchaeus and his family. And that was a sign that the Kingdom of God was open to everyone! Not just Jews, but all God's people.³

Zacchaeus was changed that day; he found a new and loving friend. And to show that he had mended his ways, he decided to give half his possessions to the poor. And he promised restitution to those he had defrauded. The minimum did not become the maximum for him. Zacchaeus gave back even more than what was legally necessary.

Luke ended this passage with Jesus telling Zacchaeus "Today salvation has come to this house." Luke appeared to be embracing the notion that Jesus was sent by God to gather up the lost people of

Israel, and only them, but not so, because we know that rest of the story. Luke makes it clear throughout his writings that Jesus came to gather Jews, Christiana Jews, Gentiles, and all were lost. In the New Testament the lost were not the doomed or the damned. Rather the lost were literally those who had lost their way, the ones who had gotten themselves into the wrong place, those who had wandered away from God, and even those who had yet to find God – who did not know they were lost. I often explain to children that God IS, that God is constant, like a beam of light on a stage or a spotlight on the altar. God light is always there. We may wander out of that light, but it remains constant. So we might be called lost if we step away from God, or if someone – a friend or family member – says that God isn't there for them. But God is there. And all we need do is step back into God's light when we get lost, like Zacchaeus did. And when we cannot find our way back to God, it is our friends who can show us the way. That is why we live in Christian community, so when I get lost you all can show me the way, or drag me back – yelling and screaming – into the God light. I know it is a simplistic way of thinking but it works for children, and it works for me.

There are two of Kermit's hit songs that resonate with me: *It's not easy being green* and *The rainbow connection*.

In 1990 Henson's life was celebrated at his funeral at St. John the

Divine Episcopal Church in New York City with Big Bird singing “It’s not easy being green” and thanking Kermit at the end of the song. Kermit was conspicuously missing at the funeral. Jim Henson had created Kermit – his first puppet – in May of 1955, sewn from the material of one of his mother’s dresses. And he had been the voice of Kermit until the day he died. So it was fitting for Kermit not to be there.

The rainbow connection asks: “

“Why are there so many songs and about rainbows, and what’s on the other side?”

Well, we know that salvation is on the other side! Salvation came to Zacchaeus’s house that day in Jericho, not because he promised to give half of his possessions to the needy, nor because he vowed to pay back – four times over – those he had cheated. No, Zacchaeus was saved because he was a son of Abraham. My dear brothers and sisters, we too are saved, because we too are heirs of Abraham through our relationship with our brother Jesus. We are saved because we too are God’s precious children. And whether we give half of what we have or 10% of our income, or 1%, or nothing but ourselves, we are saved. Because we really will have more than enough. Because we are loved. We are saved because God loves us, and there is no minimum or maximum because God’s love is infinite.

The rainbow connection ends with:

“Someday we’ll find it, the rainbow connection
The lovers, the dreamers and me”

My friends, if we listen, really listen, to the Holy Spirit we will hear God’s dreams for us and for St. Andrew’s By-the-Sea. Then we have to be brave enough to make God’s dreams for us come true.

Lord, may it be so. Amen.

¹ According to William Barclay the 1st century historian Josephus called Jericho "a divine region" and "the fattest in Palestine." See <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/luke-19.html>.

² See <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dsb/luke-19.html>.

³ Chris Haslam, 1996-2022 See <http://montreal.anglican.org/comments/cpr31m.shtml>.