

# biblestudy: may 2016

Belton Joyner, Jr.

Based on the scripture lessons of Cokesbury's Adult Bible Study Series

## May 1, 2016 Text: Luke 17:1-10 “Increased Faith”

Hand me my eraser. This week’s study text has a few verses I’d like to eliminate! Let’s zero in on just one of them: “If your brother or sister sins, warn them to stop” (Luke 17:3a).

Sometimes I teach a course on United Methodist history. After we have been discussing the life of the early people in the Methodist movement, I’ll ask: How are we today most alike and how are we today most unlike those first Methodists? Almost without fail, the ingredient that is identified as the one most missing from our present-day journey as Christians is accountability.

From the days of the “Holy Club” on the Oxford University campus and from the days of those early Methodist small groups (classes, bands), the faithful held one another accountable. They might ask one another: “How have you failed God this past week?”

This was not done in order to create a “what a worm I am!” kind of mind set. It was to make sure that companions on the journey did not slip away from faith, the kind of faith that expressed itself in holy living.

No wonder. Look what happens in this account in Luke. As soon as the disciples hear what Jesus has to say about accountability (Luke 17:3a) and about forgiveness (Luke 17:3b), the disciples know the matter re-

volves around faith. “Increase our faith!” they cry (Luke 17:5). And then our Lord begins teaching about faith (Luke 17:6).

Maybe it’s a trade-off: I’m not eager to have you hold me accountable, so, in turn, I won’t hold you accountable. But, the companion to accountability is forgiveness (Luke 17:4). I’d love to have your forgiveness, but Jesus seems to suggest it comes at the price of my being accountable to you (and the Christian community).

Woe to the one who causes another to sin (Luke 17:1) and Jesus says that one way I cause another to sin is when I don’t caution a brother or sister whom I see sinning (Luke 17:3). This is tough duty. No wonder the disciples said, “Lord, increase our faith (Luke 17:5).

### What Someone Else Has Said:

Bishop Kenneth Carder has said (*Living Our Beliefs*, Discipleship Resources): “Discipline and accountability are often resisted in our culture as infringements on freedom. Freedom, or liberty, has come to mean the ability to pursue limitless options without impunity...(what) Dietrich Bonhoeffer called...’cheap grace.’”

### Prayer:

As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Hold me close, Lord, as I dare to expose my sin for others to see...”

## May 8, 2016 Text: Luke 17:11-19 “Grateful Faith”

Alert: I may be making a mountain out of a mole hill. Here is something that crossed my mind for the first time as I read this familiar story.

Jesus is walking along the border between Samaria and Galilee (Luke 17:11). As we encounter from time to time in the gospels, the people of Galilee and the people of Samaria did not get along very well (for example, John 4:9). So, when Jesus encounters the ten lepers, he makes a point that it is a Samaritan who comes back to praise God (Luke 17:18). The fact that Jesus makes this distinction and because the incident occurred near the border between Jewish territory and Samaritan territory, I assume that some—if not all---of the other lepers were Jews.

This means that in a time and place when Jews and Samaritans were not on good terms, these ten lepers, both Jews and Samaritans, found a way to live together.

The United Methodist General Conference begins this week in Portland, Oregon. It is no secret that there are numerous issues on which the denomination is divided: sexuality, church structure, global nature of Church, global warming. What would it take for these divisions to be set aside in order for us to live together in the face of a common leprosy? What did it take for the ten lepers to live together when otherwise they would be at each other’s throats?

What brought the lepers together was the reality that everyone except other lepers seemed to be against them, that everyone except other lepers seemed to want nothing to do with them, that everyone except other lepers walked away when they showed up.

In many places, the Church is seen as irrelevant. Many in our culture choose to have nothing to do with the Church and, indeed, want to keep the Church in a corner by itself where it does not touch the world’s concerns. Maybe, just maybe, we are the lepers who live together because no one else wants us around. I wonder if we shall be the ones who praise God when God’s healing touch gives us a new beginning.

### What Someone Else Has Said:

In her book *Accidental Saints* (Convergent Books), Nadia Bolz-Weber has written: “Church is messed up. I know that. People, including me, have been hurt by it. But as my friend...says ‘Church isn’t perfect. It’s practice.’ Among God’s people, those who have been knocked on their (backsides) by the grace of God, we practice giving and receiving the undeserved.”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You, Lord, for a new start...”

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May 15, 2016 Text: Luke 18:9-14, “Humble Faith”

Scene One: The other day a friend of mine (I shall not give a name to save possible embarrassment) noticed something in the kitchen sink. As a health-conscious soul, she eats a lot of lentils. From time to time, as she is preparing a meal, a few lentils will fall into the sink drain. The other day she saw something that didn’t make sense. Right in the middle of the drain, there was something growing. Behold! The leftover lentils had sprouted and were prospering right in the middle of her sink!

Scene Two: Jesus tells about two men who had gone to the temple to pray (Luke 18:10). One of them was a likely candidate for “Believer of the Year Award” (Luke 18:11-12) and the other even saw himself as something worth only to be thrown away (Luke 18:13). He was a leftover in the sink of life, but guess what! It is he who grows and matures and is put right with God (Luke 18:14).

Scene Three: I am looking in a mirror. I see germs and worms and other things that it’s unlikely that God would want for me. I see broken places in relationships and ways I have cared more for self than for others. There is muck and mire and the kinds of things that can accumulate in a sink drain. Yet, there is a spark of grace, the hint of new birth, the beginning of God’s tomorrow. Right in the middle of where life drains, there is the grace of new life!

Scene Four: The General Conference of The United Methodist Church

May 22, 2016 Text: Luke 18:15-17 “Childlike Faith”

A couple of weeks ago, I was on a long airplane flight and three rows behind me was a screaming child who seemed intent on testing the question of whether we were going fast enough to pass the sound barrier. We weren’t. Gasp. But Jesus says to enter the kingdom, we are to be like little children (Luke 18:17).

Yesterday, I was in the Harris Teeter. As I engaged great self-discipline to pass the candy shelves, a girl—she appeared to be about three years old—yelled and bellowed that her brother got all the candy he wanted so why couldn’t she. Gasp. But Jesus says to enter the kingdom, we are to be like little children (Luke 18:17).

The worship service was a time for quiet reflection. The moment had been important because the youth of the church had just offered a poignant interpretative dance about the rages of racism in our society. I encountered my conscience. And then, from the back of the sanctuary came the wailing of an in-arms baby. The setting was broken. Gasp. But Jesus says to enter the kingdom, we are to be like little children (Luke 18:17).

Students of the Bible have come up with numerous explanations of what Jesus meant. We are to have a simple faith. We are to show our dependence on God. We have to be loved and hugged by Jesus. (See Mark 10:16.)

Let me suggest yet another possibility. To be a child is to be incom-

May 29, 2016 Text: Luke 19:1-10 “Joyous Faith”

This text is about Zacchaeus so let’s go ahead and get the song out of our systems. I know you want to sing it!

"Zacchaeus was a very little man , and a very 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 looked up in the tree. And said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down! For I'm going to your house today! For I'm going to your house today! / Zacchaeus was a very little man, But a happy man was he, For he had seen the Lord that day And a happy man was he; And a very happy man was he.”

Many of us have sung that children’s song for generations! The story of Zacchaeus is a fun one to tell and a fun one to recall. And there is so much of power in the account: hospitality (Luke 19:6), repentance (Luke 19:8), social justice (Luke 19:8), resistance (Luke 19:7), salvation (Luke 19:9).

What has always impressed me is that the story begins with Zacchaeus going to look for Jesus, but it is Jesus who finds him...and calls him by name (Luke 19:5). In the Wesleyan tradition we have a theological term for this: prevenient grace. It is that grace of God that is at work-before we know it; it is that grace of God that has been seeking us; it is that grace of the God who knows our name even when we did not know we were known!

is still in session in Portland, Oregon. What do we see when we look at the Church’s kitchen sink? Leftovers? Persons/ideas thrown away? Growth with a new start?

Scene Five: You are looking at this issue of *Vine*. There is this strange story about the man who got right with God (“justified,” the text says—Luke 18:14) even though he was in the middle of a messed-up life. And you get to pondering: is it possible that I can have a new beginning?

**What Someone Else Has Said:** In *Baseball as a Road to God (Gotham Books)*, John Sexton wrote: “Conversion is not for the faint of heart. It can begin with a dramatic external event, or it can be the result of a lengthy period of reexamination and introspection...But a spiritual conversion looks both forward and backward. Our previous allegiances are, in the end, rejected, even as our new one is faithfully embraced. All the great stories—the modern ones like C.S. Lewis’s diligent journey and the ones from antiquity like Paul and Augustine—leave something behind as the great leap forward is taken.”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Gracious God of tomorrow, bring me from my yesterdays to the day You would give...”

plete, to be less than we shall become. Our Lord is inviting us to enter the kingdom in full knowledge that we are not all that we can be. Coming into the kingdom is not what we do because we have finally got it all put together, but because we know that we still have a ways to go.

Children remind us that God plans a tomorrow. In a sense, my spiritual journey is most mature when I recognize that I still have some growing to do. A child who screams in an airplane or who cries in the candy aisle is a reminder that there is still some maturing to be done. The kingdom of God is a reign in which that growth can occur. If I don’t need to grow in the faith, I am not in the kingdom, but in some self-aggrandizing, self-congratulating system.

“Then he hugged the children” (Mark 10:16, CEB)

**What Someone Else Has Said:** In David Rhodes’ novel *Driftless* (Milkweed Editions), this is said about one of the characters: “...he understood the resiliency of children, a survive-at-any-cost capacity that had allowed the human species to slosh through eons of muck, drought, starvation, plague, and war.”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Loving Parent, I come as a child...”

Some of the palpable moments in the gospels come when Jesus names someone: Jesus calls by name the mystified woman who first met the resurrected Lord—Mary (John 20:16) (Can you imagine what it was like to hear her name?) Jesus gives a nickname to Simon, by calling him Cephas (Peter) which means “The Rock” (John 1:42). (Is there an irony in the one who betrayed Jesus three times being called “The Rock?”) And, of course, the angel instructs Joseph that Mary’s baby is to be named Jesus (which means “salvation”) (Matthew 1:21). Names.

All of this is to say that when Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name, we find a cause for our own rejoicing. He knows my name, too. He knows your name, too. We get baptized by name. And we too are invited to come down from the tree.

**What Someone Else Has Said:** John R. Tyson (*The Way of the Wesleys*, Eerdmans) has said: “The Wesleys believed that all people have within their conscience a witness to the presence and call of God upon their life. The conscience becomes a kind of loudspeaker through which God the Holy Spirit addresses people in their inner self...”

**Prayer:** As you prepare this lesson, let your prayer begin: “Thank You, Lord, for seeing me...”