

"Best Seats in the House"
Hab 1:1-4, 2:1-4; Lk 19:1-10

Last weekend, the Yankees lost their chance to be in the 2010 World Series. You'd think with a roster that costs \$206MM, they'd be able to whip the socks off of the Rangers (who, you might know, have a payroll of a quarter of the price). As a matter of fact, many would say that with the cost of the Yankees' line-up, they should be able to get into the World Series *every* year. Alas, the Yankees are just like most teams in baseball: sometimes they're up; sometimes they're down.

A roster that rich has to be paid for on someone's back. And in the world of Yankee baseball, it's paid for on the backs of season ticket holders. I suppose every person on the planet heard about the original cost of tickets at Yankee Stadium. It was a worldwide news blast. You had to've been as blown away as I was by the price of corporate seats. Wasn't the top ticket \$2500? The good news is that those \$2500 seats came with free hot dogs.

But even *pre*-crash banks had trouble justifying that expense. So, after a few weeks of embarrassing camera pans of empty seats, Yankee execs got smart. They slashed baseline seat prices as much as 40%. The hot dogs were still free. Thanks be to God.

Unfortunately, the damage to the new Yankee Stadium's image was already done. Especially to the locals, it became clearer than ever that an era of Bronx Baseball had ended. No longer could a guy from a side street walk up to the stadium at the last minute and buy an affordable ticket. It was more likely the case that *few-if-any* of the children through whose neighborhood the wealthiest walked to get to the famed complex would ever see the Yankees play in person.

Evidently the negative publicity got about as much airtime as the empty seats and the Bombers' execs came up with another plan. Season ticket holders would have the opportunity to purchase a ticket at the price of the first seats in the House that Ruth Built in 1923. Was it \$6 or \$8.00? My memory's fuzzy and my Google search came up dry.

What I didn't understand, though, was why the Yankees offered season ticket holders a chance at ridiculously reduced tickets, rather than offering the cheap seats to the local folks? For me, it would've been much more profitable to give the tickets to the poor kid down the street and his grandpa. Then, a friend challenged me, "Why'd I think it had to be a *corporate* Yankee decision to essentially give tickets away to those who'd never otherwise have a chance to see their beloved Yankees play? Why didn't I get more upset that there wasn't an incredible *individual* response to this *generous* corporate idea? Why didn't I think that the individual people who *could* buy the \$8 tickets *would* buy them then give 'em away?"

I suppose for me the idea of an absent corporate response made the blaming of greed much easier to process. Throwing people into categories makes the idea of injustice so much easier to navigate. Individuals get swallowed up in corporate problems, taking us back to last week's discussion of dichotomies. Rich people; poor people. Good people; bad people. Illegal people; naturalized people. Tax paying citizens; welfare moms. Investment banks; mortgage

holders. Profitable baseball franchises; Bronx school children. Thinking about people in categories allows us to think about a problem as too much larger than ourselves. This, in turn, gives us permission to avoid taking steps to address the problem at all, thus leaving solutions for the corporate-types to address. You and I are *thereupon* absolved of responsibility, since, well, it was a corporate-created issue to begin with.

Luke entices us to see Zacchaeus not as a part of the category of tax collectors (chief tax collector, no less). Luke entices us to see Zacchaeus as a short little tax collecting man who scampers up a tree to catch a glimpse at a righteous celebrity. He is an individual with ruddy cheeks and balding head, I imagine after years of singing that corny song in Sunday School. He was a wee little man whom Jesus called down from his perch of great perspective, then takes a leap to stare grace in the face. Jesus calls Zacchaeus out from the category of sinner and Zacchaeus jumps over the threshold of salvation.

Somewhere between the tree and that dusty Jericho road, in the presence of Jesus, Zacchaeus claims God's gift of grace and responds with a cry of justice, "To the poor, I will give half of my possessions. To the defrauded I will give back four-fold." Zacchaeus had such gratitude for the grace that he received from Jesus that he immediately determined to give to the poor and those defrauded in proportion to his wealth.

There's room for us to be give proportionally to the poor, oppressed, and disadvantaged, too. If you're not currently tithing, you *could* tithe what Christmas bonus you expect to receive this year. -Or you could tithe your raise if one's in the cards. If you hit the lottery, well, let's just say if you hit the lottery, I expect to see you in my office. But seriously, you've gotten along without those incremental funds to this point so you can probably get along without at least a percentage of them after they plop down out of the sky in front of you.

Someone once said, "Justice is the will of God distributed."ⁱ Justice happens when members give offerings to the church that are sent to Shelter our Sisters, the Center for Food Action, Family Promise, Jersey City and New Orleans. Justice happens when one individual leaves the best seat in his house and determines to address an individual wronged such that yesterday's replaced washing machine becomes today's guests at an overnight shelter's greatest break, a container of donated Similac evokes a mother's tears of relief, and your household's bonus ShopRite turkey becomes Thanksgiving dinner for a family of five only two blocks away.

As a matter of fact, you and I are probably going to be deluged with offers to earn a free turkey for Thanksgiving or even a free ham for Christmas. (I'm sure you've seen these offers year after year. Anyone who spends a few hundred dollars at about any grocery store this holiday season will undoubtedly receive a coupon this year, too.) Why not this year, if you weren't planning on it already, we commit to *buying* our own turkeys and giving the coupon for a *free* one to the Center for Food Action as part of our Thanksgiving Basket drive? CFA will give the turkey to a family that doesn't have anything close to a few hundred dollars to spend on groceries. When something that we're going to buy anyway is "buy two get one free", buy two and give away the free one!

People living in middle and upper middle income brackets receive enticements throughout the year from stores, pro sports organizations and various name brands so that we'll be swayed their way. Those same companies sure aren't going out of their way to lure families

in lower income bracket. This leaves people in lower income brackets with proportionately still less. When you and I leverage our power as consumers to bring benefits to others who wouldn't be likely candidates to receive enticements to shop, we're being instruments of justice. If we all choose to use our consumer power on behalf of people with none, then our individual responses to our good fortune will help heal the widespread injustices of the world.

Just as Luke entices us to see Zacchaeus as redeemed out of the category of sinner and redeeming as a justice-minded soul, Jesus encourages us to leap down from our far away perches to address the injustices of the world with equally hyperbolic enthusiasm. In the midst of engaging the world in faith we become totally consumed by our desire to respond to the needs of the world in love, demonstrating the "inseparable relationship between salvation and repentance, between faith and acts of ... justice"ⁱⁱ.

Somewhere on the way from treetop to roadside, we'll realize that the best seats in the house come with a price that we'll be happy to pay. Thanks be to God

ⁱ Paul D. Duke, "A Festive Repentance" found in *Christian Century*, October 18, 1995 issue.

ⁱⁱ F. Wellford Hobbie, "Expository Article on Luke 19:1-10" found in *Interpretation*, pg. 285.