

Reformation C (10/30/2016)  
Isaiah 1:10-18  
Psalm 32:1-7  
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12  
**Luke 19:1-10**

*The church's history is a story of faith in action. God seeks out the lost in every generation, rewriting our stories for the sake of new life and calling us to the work of salvation on behalf of others.*

*Stories of Faith in Action.* That's the title of the publication the ELCA circulates to highlight the many and varied ministries that we support with our offerings. And, it's not just a catchy PR slogan; these are vital stories to tell. Ours is a denomination of four million disciples, one of the largest Christian bodies in the United States. Together, we contribute to the work of God's reign across the country and around the world in ways that no individual congregation could dream of. So, the story of our faith as a denomination comes to expression in countless acts of loving service to neighbors near and far. Pastor Monica Villarreal, a seminary classmate of mine, tells the story of a ministry we support in her congregation:

["A mission as deep as Jacob's well," *Stories of Faith in Action*, 2016, p.9]

Of course, the ELCA is only one expression of the church throughout the ages, a church that has always had stories of faith to tell. By the call of a mysterious rabbi, the first disciples dropped everything to follow in his footsteps. He brought them face to face with the poor and the sick, with sinners and tax collectors – outcasts who found belonging in his company. He led them all the way to the cross where all their assumptions about power and glory were overturned. Finally, he met them

outside an open tomb and in the upper room and beside the sea, bringing their hope back to life and anointing them to bear God's life-giving love to the world.

This first story survived the centuries and inspired another enduring story of faith. Martin Luther, an unknown monk living and teaching in a far corner of the Holy Roman Empire thrust himself into the center of 16<sup>th</sup>-century history by his fearless proclamation of God's grace in defiance of the Christian establishment. Luther and the Reformers objected especially to the sale of indulgences, or promises of salvation printed on paper, insisting that salvation rested in God's hands alone and could be grasped only through faith. So, the church's effort to line its pockets at the expense of common people was both theologically and morally bankrupt. For their stand, the Reformers were excommunicated from the church and condemned as outlaws. But their story of faith lives on, and we honor it again today with our own gospel proclamations in word and song and service.

Stories of Christian faith are broad and sweeping, but they're also profoundly personal. Jesus seeks out and saves not only the lost in general, but also individuals in particular.<sup>1</sup> Zacchaeus is a prime example. He's easy to overlook – small in stature, and spurned by his community on account of his unsavory business practices – yet, Jesus picks him out of a crowd and invites himself over for dinner. **Zacchaeus is the last person we would expect Jesus to favor, the last person we would expect Jesus to call to faithfulness. But Zacchaeus is transformed by his encounter with divine love in the flesh, making restitution for the wrong he has done, and sharing his abundance with people in need. His story of faith stems from a**

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Leach, in *Feasting on the Word*, Year C, Vol. 4, 262.

**single moment of salvation in Jesus' presence, a moment in which his tomb is opened and he learns the meaning of abundant life.**

**Dear church, God is also in the business of rewriting our stories for the sake of new life and calling us to the work of salvation on behalf of others.** So, what is *your* story of faith? As we prepare to make pledges of financial support to Peace in December, I invite you to consider the ways God has encountered you in and through this congregation. How have you encountered divine love in the flesh? How have you come to trust the good news of God's reign in our midst? How have you been transformed for the sake of new life?

In your bulletin, you'll find a form with a few guidelines to help you tell your story. There are extra pens and pencils in the pews. Take the next few minutes to quietly jot down some thoughts. Then, would you consider writing down your story of faith, either to keep for yourself or to offer as a gift to the rest of the congregation? **Those of you who are bold enough to share your stories of faith will enlighten and encourage us as we enter another new year together, trusting that Christ will continue to invite himself into this house to seek and save us.**

Example: Peace Lutheran Church loves children well. It became clear the moment I arrived that children quickly find a place of belonging here. Surrogate siblings, parents, and grandparents abound, and children are free to participate in the life of the congregation in ways that match their God-given gifts and personalities. For Alex in particular, Peace is a home away from home (and it's not just because the guy who's always talking at home is the same guy who's always talking in church). She is surrounded by a communion of saints, people who make God's love apparent to her. So, I give thanks to God for Peace, a place where Alex and her friends in Christ can continue to grow in faith, hope, and love.