**Transformers and Transformation**

**FBC Albemarle**

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When I was a kid, one of my favorite cartoons was Transformers. I loved Optimus Prime, the leader of the Autobots. He was an 18-wheel big rig who transformed into a huge robot that fought off Megatron and the Decepticons from taking over the world. What 10-year old boy doesn’t love a tractor-trailer that turns into a robot that fights off the evil robots?

The tagline for Transformers was “More Than Meets the Eye.” I think that is a great tagline for the familiar story from our text today. 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 as the Savior passed that way, he looked up in the tree. And he said, “Zacchaeus, you come down, for I’m going to your house today, for I’m going to your house today.” Zacchaeus was a wee 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. That is a song many of us learned as children but there is actually a lot more than meets the eye.

Luke puts the story of Zacchaeus right after the story of the blind beggar receiving his sight and draws parallels between the two stories. In essence, both men wanted to see: the blind man wanted to physically be able to see and Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus but was too short to see over the crowd. The blind man, unable to see, asks the crowd what is going on. They answer him that Jesus of Nazareth is passing by. Later, the crowd tries to prevent him from crying out to Jesus (18:39). Here, the crowd operates as an obstruction to the blind man's quest for sight. Similarly, Zacchaeus, being a wee little man, is unable to see Jesus. Here again, the crowd serves as a barrier to Jesus. Yet, each man overcomes the obstructions through his determined actions. The blind man disregards the crowd and shouts "even more loudly" and Zacchaeus climbs a sycamore tree. Jesus responds to the men's actions. He calls the blind man to him and heals him and, in response to Zacchaeus' actions, he invites himself to the tax collector's house. In each case, Jesus rewards their persistence.

My guess is that no one in Jericho liked Zacchaeus. They would have been horrified to think that, of all the people in the town, Zacchaeus would be the one known by name to millions of people two thousand years later. He was exactly the kind of man everybody despised. Not only a tax collector but a chief tax collector; that is, not only did he make money on the side, in addition to his legitimate collections, but he also made more money from the tax collectors working under him. So, one can imagine how much Zacchaeus was hated by his enemies and even his “friends.”

Yet, Jesus invites himself over to the chief tax collector’s home. It was there, after encountering Jesus; Zacchaeus makes an extravagant repentant promise. Repentance here isn’t just a change of heart but it also involved restoration and making amends for his prior wrongdoings. “Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.” (v. 8) His response to encountering Jesus was a total transformation. Unlike the rich young ruler who turned away from God because he wasn’t willing to let go of his wealth, Zacchaeus voluntarily gives it up because he has found something more valuable. Here is the spiritual truth: Where Jesus is, there salvation is found for those who accept him as master and reorder their lives accordingly.

When transformation occurs, there is always more than meets the eye. There is transformation of the heart that leads to a transformation of life. When we encounter Jesus, we experience transformation. This doesn’t just happen when we first accept salvation, but transformation continues to occur as we consistently encounter Jesus in our lives. My hope for us individually and as a church is that we continue to experience transformation in 2018.

Transformation doesn’t happen out of the blue. Transformation occurs with preparation. Zacchaeus climbed the sycamore tree in order to see Jesus coming through town. Without climbing the tree and “going out on a limb,” Zacchaeus would’ve missed the opportunity to encounter the Savior.

Over the last few years, I believe we have been making preparations as a church. We’ve not been renovating our building to make it look nicer for ourselves. We have been making preparations to welcome new people into our building and to be a resource for our community. The renovations are not to create a country club environment but to offer the best we have to others. I think we’ve made great strides.

We have also been making preparations as a body of Christ for God to do big things in and through us. I believe we are now better prepared to welcome in new people into our fellowship. I think we have the structure in place for us to better care for one another within the body and also care for the people out in our community. The preparations we’ve made have required sacrifice and a lot of sweat equity. I look forward to seeing God do big things in 2018 in the church.

The preparations we make leads to personal encounters that result in transformation. Zacchaeus climbed the sycamore tree to see Jesus. Seeing Jesus led to Jesus inviting himself over to Zacchaeus’ house. That personal encounter transformed Zacchaeus in every way. Spending time with Jesus helped him to see that Jesus is the Messiah and that changed everything.

For many of us, it has been a long time since our initial encounter with Jesus that resulted in salvation. For me, it has been 28 years. For many of you, it has been much longer than that. Yet, we have continued to experience transformation because we’ve continued to encounter Jesus. Maybe it was a stranger in the restaurant. Maybe it was the encouraging word from your best friend. Maybe it was a book you read. Maybe it was the moment you were still in God’s presence or when you were reading the Bible. However it may have been, you’ve encountered Jesus and it has changed you.

I’ve seen how these encounters have changed us as a congregation because it has changed our perspective. Transformation always changes the way we see ourselves and the people around us. When Zacchaeus encountered Jesus, he no longer cared about the things that were important to him previously. He no longer cared about his own wealth. He cared more about others and paying retribution to those he had hurt.

As we have gotten outside the walls of this building and into the community over the last few years, our perspective has changed. Rather than focusing on how we can pay the bills and keep the doors open, we have placed more efforts in living in God’s kingdom.

Through our partnership with Habitat for Humanity, we have seen ourselves as doers of God’s word more than just listeners of his word. Our willingness to sacrifice our time, energy and money has increased with our partnership. It has taught us to build God’s kingdom literally and figuratively.

Over the last year, we have become a sending church. Not only did we send 40 people to Peru to minister alongside a Peruvian church but we have sent missionaries to Myanmar, China and Rhode Island. You have supported them financially and through your prayers. We have committed to a two-year partnership with Rob and Amanda Rone through their Firm Foundation Training Center in Myanmar where we will support them financially and also by sending a mission team when possible. By sending and participating in missions, we are learning to see the world through the lens of God’s kingdom rather than our own.

I also believe that we are in midst of a transformation with our young people in the church and community. We are investing in our young people by engaging them and building lasting relationships. We are moving from wondering why they just don’t come to church like past generations and learning to see them through the lens of compassion and empathy. We are investing in today’s generation not just for the future but more for the present because they bring us vitality.

I am looking forward to seeing more transformation in 2018. I can’t wait to witness the transformation that will occur in our lives individually and corporately. I can’t wait to see how our church continues to change as we invest in young people, middle-aged people and more experienced people. I can’t wait to see how God changes us as we invest more in our community. I can’t wait to see the results of caring for one another even more than we do today. We’re ready. There is more than meets the eye at First Baptist. The Spirit of the Living God is with us!