

***Power Rising: Make Us a People Ready
Ready to Take a Risk***
Luke 19:1-10

The writer Brian Doyle tells a story of being in New York City just a few months after September 11, when the city still felt pretty raw. . He'd been in a pretty dull conference during the day, and he stepped into a bar on the Upper West Side on the way back to his hotel. He was tired, and feeling a little cynical, and wishing he were at home, in Portland. Most of the people there, he said, seemed like they'd come in for a beer after work. There was a table of men in the corner who looked like the kind of workers who climb up utility poles or tall buildings. Another table of older women (that's what he called them; maybe they were my age?) wore clothes that signaled corporate life. There was a Marine in his dress uniform at the bar, and two older men that Doyle took to be his father and uncle. The Marine was telling them stories that seemed to make them proud.

And then, he says, two young firemen walked in the door. They weren't in their dress uniforms; they had their FDNY t-shirts on, and sturdy work boots, so you could tell they really were firemen, not tourists wearing FDNY shirts.

The firemen took a few steps toward the bar, Doyle said, "and then something happened. Everyone in the bar stood up, silently. The table of women stood up first...and then everyone else stood up, including me. I thought perhaps someone would start to applaud but no one made a sound. The men standing at the bar turned and faced the firemen, and then the young Marine drew himself up straight as a tree and saluted the firemen, and then his father and uncle saluted too, and then everyone else in the bar saluted the firemen. I tell you that there wasn't a sound in the place, not the clink of a glass or the shuffle of feet or a cough or anything.

After a few seconds one of the firemen nodded to everyone, and the other fireman made a slight gesture of acknowledgement with this right hand, and the bartender set two beers on the bar, and everyone sat down again, and everything went on as before; but not."¹

Every once in a while, something compels you to just stand aside and make room. Sometimes it's an only-in-nature thing: a particularly colorful sunset, a storm so powerful that it roils up the ocean or bends trees sideways, that amazing lunar eclipse that happened this week. That's awe. It's what we feel when we suddenly know we are in the presence of something greater, bigger than us, something we did not create ourselves and never could. That feeling of awe is often how we identify God. There, we say, is something only God could make happen. There is God.

Awe is falling to your knees—either physically or figuratively—in wonder and humility and amazement.

¹ Brian Doyle, *Eight Whopping Lies*, p. 3-5

Once in a great while we are awe-struck by the presence of God-likeness in another person, someone whose strength or generosity or courage is so astonishing, that we are drawn to connection. We momentarily suspend our criticisms, all the ways we are inclined to stand apart from other people and make observations, or judgments.

Homeboy Industries is a non-profit, faith-based organization in Los Angeles. Its work is to reclaim gang members that everyone else has given up on. Gregory Boyle, the Jesuit priest who founded Homeboy, tells about once being invited to give a speech to 600 social workers in Richmond, Virginia. He took one of his 'homies' (as he calls them) with him. Sergio was in his mid-twenties. He'd spent time in prison, and for a while he'd been homeless. He'd also been a heroin addict, but he was now in recovery, and he was part of the substance abuse team at Homeboy Industries.

Sergio stood in front of that big audience in Virginia, with tattoos all over his face and neck, so different from the nice, well-educated people in front of him. He began his story: "I guess you could say my mom and me, well, we didn't get along so good. I think I was six when she looked at me and said, 'Why don'tcha just kill yourself? You're such a burden to me.'" After the gasp in the room quieted a little, he went on. "I think I was nine when she drove me to Baja, walked me up to the door of this orphanage and said, 'I found this kid.' I was there ninety days before my grandmother could get out of my mom where she had dumped me, and my grandmother came and rescued me."

There was more. "My mom beat me every single day of my elementary school years, with things you could imagine and a lot of things you couldn't. Every day my back was so bloody that I wore three t-shirts to school, so the other kids wouldn't see the blood seeping through. They'd make fun of me because I wore three shirts, even on the hottest days."

"I wore three t-shirts even when I became an adult, cuz I was ashamed of my wounds." He stopped for a minute, to gather himself. "But now I welcome my wounds. Sometimes I run my fingers over my scars. My wounds are my friends. How can I help others to heal if I don't welcome my own wounds?"²

And suddenly, all those social workers who had started out just being polite were in awe. They felt the presence of true greatness. There he was, this guy from the barrio, with tattoos all over him, a felony record practically written across his face; someone you would pass on the street and shake your head at, either in pity or in judgment. And somehow he'd found, right in the mess of his life, in the scars of that awful childhood, his own healing. A way to hold the world—and himself—with a compassion his own mother withheld from him. I wonder if those social workers never saw their work—or the world—in quite the same way again.

A moment of awe can change us.

We spend so much of our lives trying to get on top of things. We gather up education and resume entries and confidence to give ourselves a competitive advantage. We measure ourselves, consciously or unconsciously, against other people. That's not evil; it's how we

² Gregory Boyle, *Barking to the Choir*, p.

gauge whether we're OK. That's what this culture seems to require of us: that we work hard to make our way to the highest place we can, a place we can look down from. A perspective that makes it easy to evaluate and compare—judge—other people, pretty much everything we see.

Awe is coming face-to-face with something so much bigger, so beyond your own ability to master or create or control, that all you can do is stand underneath it. Not out of humiliation or defeat, but with reverence, a sort of wonder.

This morning you heard—again, I would guess—Luke's story of Zacchaeus. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a tax collector, which is a little bit of biblical code. It signals that he was someone who was known to have no moral compass. He'd betrayed his own people for the benefits and privileges that came with getting along in the Roman Empire. Zacchaeus was no doubt comfortable financially. He had a home. Good working hours. His children went to private school. A good life. He just wasn't giving much back.

For some odd reason, we're also told that Zacchaeus was short. What's that about? Why is his height an important detail in this spare story?

On this day, Zacchaeus—clearly resourceful—has climbed up into a tree. He doesn't need anything from Jesus, he thinks, but he wants to see better when Jesus walks through town. So he's taken a position above all those people he takes money from, all those people who don't think much of him. He can look down on all of them, the people who have lined the road needing something from this healer.

Jesus looks up and sees Zacchaeus in the tree, above all the rest. "Come down," Jesus says to him. Come down. I want to come to your house tonight.

You can hear this story the same way you heard it when you were a child in Sunday School. It still makes sense that way: cute story about a short, unpopular guy who Jesus picks out of the crowd. But I'm suggesting to you this morning that there's more for us to take in here.

"Come down," Jesus said to Zacchaeus.

Maybe 'come down' is what Jesus always says, to every one of us. Maybe whatever it is Jesus wants for us can only happen when you're on the ground, looking up at the world instead of down on it.

In this story, Zacchaeus responds to Jesus immediately. He scrambles down from the tree and he falls all over himself with unrestrained, almost embarrassing, enthusiasm. "Look, Lord—I'll give half my possessions to the poor. If I've cheated anyone, I'll repay them four times what I took." It sounds a little breathless, doesn't it? He's suddenly willing to do whatever he needs to to follow Jesus. He offers up everything he can think of—probably more than he can ever deliver on.

Almost surely Jesus knew that Zacchaeus was not going to single-handedly make things up to all the people he'd helped the Roman tax system oppress. But that seems not to be the point—

because Jesus sees that something has happened inside Zacchaeus. He says, ‘Today, this man is saved. Up there, in the tree, he was lost. And now he’s been found.’

I wonder if what saved Zacchaeus—the thing that pulled him out of that tree and onto the ground, where he had to look up at people instead of down on them—wasn’t awe. Awe at seeing Jesus reach out to heal the same people that just last week Zacchaeus had treated like objects, tools of the tax system. Awe at Jesus’ kindness, his willingness to touch people no matter how sick they were, how little they had to give back, how many tattoos they had, how many t-shirts they wore to cover their scars. Awe at a compassion so immense that all Zacchaeus could do was come down from his tree and stand under it.

I know that feeling. It’s how I feel every time Harold Caudle thanks me for giving him and Shari and Trevor the opportunity to have Tyler and Alisa come live with them.

Awe puts everything in a different perspective. The world looks different when you’re looking up at it instead of down. Awe is what moves us to risk something big for something good. And awe can save us.