

Proper 26C: Luke 19:1-10
Piedmont Episcopal Church
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Vampires, Parasites, and Zacchaeus

Halloween, as you know, is tomorrow, and as it has been my custom this time of year, I have chosen as my topic this morning one of the classic monsters of our popular culture—vampires. I don't imagine you've heard a sermon on vampires before, but I promise there is a direct connection with the Gospel, if you'll allow me to explain.

After having zombies hog the cinematic spotlight in the past several years, the vampire is seeing a comeback. That's the conclusion—or at least the hope—of executives over at AMC studios. The cable channel has for the past decade been the go-to place for zombie action—AMC is host the wildly popular show *The Walking Dead* and its spinoffs—but now it is now gambling on our culture rediscovering its fascination with vampires, for it has just launched a TV remake of Anne Rice's *Interview with the Vampire*. To be fair, vampires have never really fallen out of fashion. In 2009, “Twilight Parties” were held around the world to celebrate the midnight DVD release of *Twilight*, the film based on the young adult vampire novel by Stephenie Meyer. Teens, tweens, and adults gathered in living rooms, bookstores, and funeral homes (!) to watch the movie by candlelight, drink blood-red punch, and use napkins secured by plastic vampire-teeth rings. Over the next six years, three more movies based on the sequels were released. The popularity of Meyer's vampire books led to an abundance of imitators, as a quick scan of the young adult selves of any bookstore will indicate. Before *Twilight*, though, you had *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, both the original 1992 movie and the even more successful TV show that spanned seven seasons and enjoyed a large following among the 15-to-30 demographic. But the “fang phenomenon” is not limited to the young adult market. Vampires star in a broad range of adult fiction too—from mysteries to romance to erotic novels. Far from being a small fringe interest, vampires have for over three decades now filled our televisions, our movie screens, our bookstores, and our computers in online discussion boards and blogs.

What's striking about vampires, even more than their enduring popularity, is how they have changed over the years. Once a creature from our nightmares, the vampire has become a teen idol, a sex object and a romantic hero. This is shocking when you consider how vampires were thought of originally, as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, the quintessential vampire novel. Working from folkloric legends from Balkan and Slavic cultures in southeastern Europe, Stoker gave us the vampire as we generally understand him—an animated corpse that survives by drinking human blood, and which possesses supernatural abilities like hypnotism and shape-shifting capabilities—he can turn into a wolf or bat or dissolve into a mist—as well as suffering certain weaknesses—vulnerability to sunlight, aversion to the cross and other holy objects, and the need to return to his native earth or grave during the day. Those are all characteristics we associate with vampires. But what is often not appreciated is that, for all its macabre elements, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is an ostensibly Christian novel, understandable only in a Christian world. It is thread through with appeals to God and deals with explicitly Christian themes such as sin, temptation, and trusting in God for salvation.

Indeed, in Stoker's creation the vampire is itself a peculiarly Christian thing. He is Christian in that he is *anti*-Christian, opposed to Christ, unholy only as Christ is holy. He is a demonic inversion of the faithful Christian. Consider those characteristics of vampires I mentioned: Vampires keep to darkness and fear the sunlight, which destroys them. This is the opposite of the Christian, whom St. Paul calls a child of light. At the same time, vampires shrink from the crucifix and other holy symbols, rather than embrace them as signs of God's promise. Then you have the most gruesome fact of vampires—their drinking human blood. This is a parody, a mockery, a perversion of the Christian sacrament of Communion, whereby Christ *gives* his life to us through his body and blood. The vampire *takes* life from others, consumes their life as a predator. He is a thief and destroyer of human flourishing. Christians by contrast receive eternal life freely given by Christ. At the same time, vampires spread their contagion through violence, corrupting others to become like them, just as sin spreads as we sinners suck the life out of each other, using those around us for our own desires. This is the opposite of the faithful Christian who gives their life for others, as Christ did for us. Because they live by taking, vampires have life that is not full life. It is a life cursedly prolonged in its opposition to the eternal life found in Christ. It is a living death of unrest. This is the very condition of humanity under the sway of sin. Indeed, the vampire might well be regarded as a metaphor for our fallen humanity: the traits associated with vampires are how we all *metaphorically* behave under the power of sin. That is in fact how Stoker portrayed Count Dracula in his novel, as the example and embodiment of a life corrupted by sin. He is literally a “monster,” something to stare at, to take heed of lest we succumb to the same fate.

In this we see why as Christians we should care about vampires, why it's worthwhile pondering them for a moment and not just dismiss them as make-believe creatures that exist only in movies or TV shows. For when you strip away all the supernatural elements, and the Hollywood effects, we see that the vampire, the Dracula kind, is a warning to us, a specifically grisly demonstration of what it means to live life apart from God, living as a parasite on others, taking from them, in the hope of sustaining our cursed life.

That is in fact the kind of existence exhibited by Zacchaeus, the tax collector in this morning's gospel lesson. Zacchaeus, you see, is a kind of vampire, sucking the life of his people by extorting excessive taxes from them. As a tax collector, he would have been given power to collect money for the occupying Roman empire. But tax collectors routinely demanded more than Rome asked for and pocketed the difference, becoming rich on the backs of their fellow Jews. And this guy, Zacchaeus, was a *chief* tax collector. He probably had a staff of collectors, and together he and his cohorts fleeced their countrymen for all they could. After they had skimmed off their people, Zacchaeus would skim off his men, taking a portion for himself. He is probably very, very rich and probably very, very corrupt. And for these reasons, he was probably the most hated person in the village, hated and feared, a monster, a vampire—worse, the head “vampire.” And he waits up in the tree—maybe not hanging upside down like a bat, but up in a tree—at a safe predator's distance, to watch the Son of God walk past, in the midst of the good, weak crowd, his prey.

But Jesus isn't afraid of Zacchaeus. He comes to where Zacchaeus is perched and calls out to him, calls to him by name. Jesus knows who he is, *what* he is. He says, “Zacchaeus, today I must

stay at your house.” This is interesting because, if you know anything about vampires, you’d know that, according to the lore, vampires can’t enter someone’s house unless they invite him. If there is any truth to that lore, Jesus flips that script by inviting himself into Zacchaeus’ house, into his lair. At his house, Zacchaeus hosts Jesus, much to the chagrin of the pitchfork wielding townspeople, who are powerless to do anything more than grumble.

We aren’t told what precisely took place at that dinner, or what was said, but by the conclusion of the meal, the curse Zacchaeus had been under was lifted. Whatever that curse was—base greed or the desire to get back at the kids who picked on him as a youth because he was so small, which he used to justify his taxing them to death—whatever the curse was, whatever the underlying sin was, the curse was lifted over the course of dinner with Jesus. Instead of Zacchaeus sucking the life out of people, Jesus gave him a taste of real life, eternal life.

And what was the result? Pain...and joy, both. For Jesus’s grace pierced Zacchaeus to the heart, as with a stake, and out of him came pouring his ill-gotten gains, his life’s blood. “Look,” Zacchaeus exclaims, “half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much—the blood that I have taken as a vampire, as a parasite, will be multiplied and flow back into my people for life.” I say his encounter with Jesus was painful. It had to be, for someone who had spent so much of his life scheming and extorting as he climbed the tax collector ladder and acquired more and more money. And yet, as painful as it was, Zacchaeus’ declaration that he will give the lot of it away is blurted out with excitement and joy. He was overwhelmed by joy at the chance to escape his lonely, sad vampiric existence.

Zacchaeus had been pierced and all the sin-sick blood flowed out. It’s a dark image, I know, and you probably think I’m taking this whole vampire theme too far. But consider this: where was it that Jesus first found Zacchaeus? Up in a sycamore tree. Now, this wasn’t a sycamore like the sycamores we have here in Virginia—with their spiky cone balls and oversized leaves—*Planatas occidentalis*. No, the sycamore Zacchaeus was in is the fig-mulberry sycamore, *Ficus sycomorus*. The fig-mulberry has fruit like that of the common fig, but its foliage resembles that of the mulberry. Like the common fig, mulberry fig trees were cultivated all over the Mediterranean.

Now the interesting thing about the sycamore fig is that, in order to make them edible, you have to wound the figs, pierce them at an early ripening stage, in order to induce a sharp increase in the emanation of ethylene gas, which accelerates the growth and ripening of the fruit considerably. This is important since otherwise the fruit will not fully develop and will stay hard, or it will be spoiled by parasitic wasps that penetrate the fruit and reproduce in it. This fact helps to understand prophet Amos in the Old Testament, who described himself as “a herdsman and a dresser of sycamores.” It was his job evidently to pierce sycamore figs so that they would ripen and the parasites would be purged. Is this not the effect that Jesus has on that fig of a man, Zacchaeus, hanging up there in the tree? Jesus meets and eats with Zacchaeus and as a result, he is pierced to the heart. His money, his life-blood, bleeds out, the parasite of sin is purged, and he is enabled to ripen, to grow to spiritual maturity and be fruitful. It’s poetic image.

So Zacchaeus the vampire, the tax collector, meets Jesus, and is pierced, as he pierced others. His life pours out of him, the curse is lifted and he ceases to be undead, a creature of the

darkness. He dies to that kind of unlife and is reborn a man, a living man, the curse broken. “Today, salvation has come to this house.” Jesus says.

Again, maybe I’m making too much of this. But if we understand Zacchaeus in the way I have suggested, as a guy who is for all intents dead—dead socially, dead spiritually, dead theologically—and yet miraculously finds life in Christ, then we recognize his story to be the story of the Gospel, a story of God coming to sinners, calling our name, inviting himself into our home, our world, our hearts, despite our decay, putting a stake in us and, with grace and forgiveness, raising us up from a living death to true life. Zacchaeus’ story before Jesus is the story of countless others who are walking around, preying on others, not realizing that the life they live is really an unlife, and that life, real life, eternal life is available in Jesus.

On this eve of “Halloween,” when all the monsters and ghouls come out to play, we in the church rejoice that we can see God’s work even in monsters, in vampires like Zacchaeus, in sinners like us. God calls out to all who walk in darkness to come out into his marvelous light, offering to all who are cursed with unlife real, lasting and eternal life in Christ. And for that we say, Thanks be to God!