

The Pope has gone back to Rome after a successful visit to America. Everyone greeted him like a long-lost cousin. Well, almost everyone. We visited and talked and enjoyed our time together, then drove him to the airport, told him not to be a stranger, and invited him back for Christmas. Then, on his flight home, his people let slip that he had met with Kim Davis, the county clerk from Kentucky, who refused to issue marriage licenses after the Supreme Court ruling for marriage equality. A lot of us, who had been happy to see the Pope, felt betrayed and grew upset and wrote letters to him saying maybe he shouldn't come see us at Christmas after all.

And I was one of them. I had my letter all written, and was on my way to the post office to mail it. I didn't have his address, but I figured if I just wrote "The Pope, Vatican City" it would get to him. There aren't a lot of Popes running around, after all. So I was on my way to the post office to mail my letter to the Pope and passed by a group of workers cutting down trees along my road and there was a man high up in a tree, and it reminded me of that story in Luke about the man in a tree. You remember that story, don't you?

His name was Zacchaeus, and he lived in this little town called Jericho, where he made his living as a publican, a tax collector, working for the Romans.

No one liked him. He had no friends. Maybe at one time he had been well-liked, maybe when he was a kid. But then he grew up and times were hard, so he took the only job he could find, working for the Romans as a tax collector, as a publican, of all things. Even though he was a publican, the Republicans didn't care for him because he worked for Rome and they thought he was a traitor. The Democrats didn't like him, because he cheated the poor. They had to say bad things about him to keep their base happy. Plus, there was a little Quaker meeting in that town, Jericho Friends Meeting—not many people know this, but I have it on good authority—who had a sign out front of their meetinghouse that read “Everyone Welcome.” But there was a little asterisk after the word “Everyone” and if you looked at the bottom of the sign, in small print, it read, “Except Zacchaeus.” So not even the Quakers liked him. If the Quakers won't take you in, you've got real problems.

So one day Jesus was traveling through Jericho and they decided to have a parade and people were gathered along the parade route holding up their babies to be kissed and carrying their sick family members up to Jesus so he could bless them, and Zacchaeus couldn't see a thing because he was short, so he climbed up in a tree, where Jesus saw him, and said, “I'm going to spend the night at your house,” and it made everyone mad, especially the people who had been saying what a great guy Jesus was. But now he'd gone and met with Zacchaeus and they were upset, especially when Zacchaeus held a press conference and told everyone he'd met with the Pope, I mean, Jesus.

So they asked Jesus, “How could you have met with him? Don’t you know about him?”

And Jesus said, “He’s a son of Abraham, too. And the son of man came to seek and save the lost.”

That’s what I remembered when I was driving down the road on my way to the post office to tell the Pope how upset I was at him for meeting with Kim Davis. It was a humdinger of a letter. Lots of righteous indignation, chock full of Bible verses. Verses I suspected he had read before, being the Pope, but had maybe forgotten, so I took the liberty of reminding him. I was on my way to mail my letter and passed these tree trimmers and saw that man up in the tree and thought of Zacchaeus, so ended up not going to the post office after all.

I tell you, friends, there is nothing that will come back to haunt a preacher more than a sermon about loving everyone. You preach a sermon about God loving everyone and that will come back and bite you on the hind quarters every time. Because one day you’ll meet Zacchaeus or Kim Davis or Donald Trump or Hilary Clinton or whoever else gets your knickers in a twist and you’ll have to show them the same grace God showed you. Because you’ve gone on record as being for grace. So you can’t all the sudden change your mind and say you’re no longer for grace. That’s why so many preachers never preach about grace, because they know how risky it is and that one day it will come back and bite you.

But once you've told others about grace, you can't go around acting like you've never met grace. You can't deny knowing grace, because people will remember you once admitted to knowing about grace. That's why it's risky to preach about grace, because the people who need grace will seek you out and you'll have to be happy to see them, even if it makes other people mad.

There was a man I knew about whose name was Will Campbell. He died two years ago, but before he died we exchanged several letters. He was a Baptist preacher, and the only white person present at the founding meeting of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference with Martin Luther King, Jr. Some people were opposed to his presence, but Bayard Rustin, a Quaker, was there and he stuck up for him, so they let him in. One day Will Campbell noticed that some of the Ku Klux Klan people trying to kill Martin Luther King, Jr. were just like the folks he'd grown up with in the 1930's in Mississippi, so he started meeting with them too, and doing their funerals, and ministering to them, and before long no one really liked him. Half the folks were mad at him for supporting African-Americans. And the other half were upset with him for ministering to the KKK.

They asked Will Campbell why he ministered to the KKK, and he said, "Jesus died for the bigots, too."

So this week I thought of Jesus, and Will Campbell, and Pope Francis. Birds of a feather. Isn't it peculiar how the same issues keep popping up century after century? People talk about how folks today are so much smarter than folks were two thousand years ago, or fifty years ago, but I have my doubts. Our collective knowledge is greater, by virtue of building upon accumulated knowledge, but I'm not sure our spiritual knowledge is that much improved. Grace offends us just as quickly and frequently today as it did two thousand years ago.

Why'd you meet with Zacchaeus?

Why'd you meet with the KKK?

Why'd you meet with Kim Davis?

That was some letter I wrote. I threw it away so my children and grandchildren won't find it in my papers after I'm dead. I don't want them to stumble upon that letter fifty years from now and conclude that on an autumn day in 2015, I took leave of my senses and denied knowing grace.