

“SINCE JESUS CAME INTO MY HEART:  
II – ZACCHAEUS”  
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Luke 19:1-10

One day a group of seminary students was gathered in a chapel for their preaching class with the great professor and preacher Charles Spurgeon. Dr. Spurgeon turned to one student and said, “Please go up to the pulpit and preach a sermon.” The student had had no preparation, he wasn’t given a specific passage on which to preach, Dr. Spurgeon simply said, “Go up to the pulpit and preach a sermon.”

Well, what that student did, in my humble opinion, was genius, and it was probably also one of the shortest sermons on record. He decided to speak about, ironically enough, the subject of today’s lesson, Zacchaeus, and his on-the-spot sermon went exactly like this.

“First, Zacchaeus was a man of very small stature; so am I.

Second, Zacchaeus was very much up a tree; so am I.

Third, Zacchaeus made haste and came down; and so will I.”

Just so you know, his fellow students erupted in applause, and even Dr. Spurgeon said he couldn’t have improved on it if he had tried! And just so you know, even though Zacchaeus made haste and came down, as did that smart young seminarian, such will not be the case this morning. You’re stuck with listening to my full, prepared-ahead-of-time sermon on good old Zacchaeus.

I love Zacchaeus’ story. I’ve loved his story since I was a child when I first learned that little ditty in Sunday School – “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he!”

And I think I’ve always loved it because I, like Zacchaeus, am height-challenged, shall we say. I get what he was going through about not being able to see things. I get how he knew that there was no way he was going to be able to see Jesus passing by because of the people standing in front of him.

If you’re not short, you don’t get it. You don’t know what it’s like to arrive early someplace, like to a movie or play, to get a good seat where you’re going to be able to see, only to have a taller person come in at the last minute, plop down right in front of you, and totally block your view. And you don’t know what it’s like to have to be creative in getting things off of high shelves. I have learned to master

the use of the ladel. I put the ladel up behind something I'm trying to get down and pull it to the edge of the shelf, whereupon it drops down into my waiting hands. When you are short, you learn to be creative.

Which is exactly what Zacchaeus did that day in Jericho. Before we revisit the incident that did occur that day, let me remind you about who Zacchaeus was. Zacchaeus was a tax collector for the Roman government (and remember the Romans were the enemies, the ones who overtook and occupied the land). So Zacchaeus, a Jew, was working for the Romans (the enemy), collecting taxes for them, and while he was at it, he collected quite a good sum of money for himself. So the people of Jericho hated him, and looked on him with disgust. He was an outcast in the midst of his own people.

So, even though he was rolling in dough, he was rolling in it all alone. Everyone turned away from him, wouldn't give him the time of day. He had reaped what he had sown.

So that's the situation when Jesus comes into town. The people are all excited to see Jesus, they have heard the amazing things He has been doing – the miracles, the healings, the teaching. Everyone wanted to see him, so they lined up on the streets to see him pass by.

And so, strangely enough, did this despised man, Zacchaeus. He wanted to see Jesus as well. We don't know exactly why. Perhaps he wanted to see what all the fuss was about. But I think there was more to it than that. I think Zacchaeus was hungry for something in his life. I think he knew things were bad, that he was bad. I think he hungered for something more, and hoped that maybe Jesus would lead him to that – so he climbed up the tree to take a look.

And maybe, just maybe, he had heard about how Jesus regularly reached out to the outcasts, the undesirables, the people that others would turn away from, people like him. Maybe he climbed up in that tree hoping, hoping for more.

We don't know exactly why he did what we did, but I can tell you what I think. I think it was the power of the Holy Spirit at work in his life. I think it was God stirring up something in Zacchaeus that made him want more, made him want life, good life, faithful life, abundant life. There's a fancy term for what I'm talking about – John Wesley called it prevenient grace – God's grace that goes before us, wooing us, calling us into the arms of His love – calling us before we even know it, before we're even aware of it – calling us. I think prevenient grace was at work in Zacchaeus' life, stirring up a desire for Jesus – and so, on that fateful day in Jericho, he climbed up the sycamore tree.

I wonder if anyone noticed him do that. The scripture doesn't say, but what the scripture does say is that as He was passing by, Jesus noticed. He stopped right in front of that very tree, looked up into the eyes of Zacchaeus, and called him to come down. Not only that, but He said He wanted to go to his home as well.

I don't who was more stunned – Zacchaeus or the crowd. Zacchaeus must have thought, “Could this really be happening? He's talking to me! He wants to go to **my** house!” It had to be humbling, and exciting and overwhelming all at the same time, and it might have led to unrestrained joy, except –

Except that the “good people,” the “faithful people,” were stunned as well, and they were not in the least bit happy about this turn of events, and they let it be known – loudly and clearly. The scripture says that they began to grumble because Jesus was going to the house of a sinner. I think this is the saddest part of the whole story. Rather than rejoice that a sinner was found by Jesus, the people were upset that Jesus would choose to be with that kind of person. It's almost like they were jealous. It's almost as if their “religiosity” got in the way – they were so self-satisfied in their religious lives, that they didn't even realize how ridiculous their cries of foul were. Jesus was going to the house of a sinner? Who among us isn't a sinner?

I remember reading something very profound once. An ad was put in a London paper asking people to respond to the question, “What's wrong with the world?” One of the most telling replies they got was from G. K. Chesterton. It read simply this: Dear Sir: I am. Yours sincerely, G. K. Chesterton. (On-line, saltforsermons.org.uk)

What's wrong with the world? I am. G. K. Chesterton understood what the crowd did not on that day in Jericho. While they were pointing fingers and denouncing Jesus for hanging out with a sinner like Zacchaeus, they failed to remember that, but for the grace of God, they were all sinners too. I wonder, do we ever do that?

Oh, if only they could have rejoiced instead of complained. If only they could have realized that at that moment a life was being totally transformed. Zacchaeus was changed from being a taker to a giver. As one pastor put it, “This man had made his living taking from others, and suddenly, after one meal with Jesus, he is giving money away like he's the United Way of Jericho.” (On-line, “Changed from a Taker to a Giver,” the Rev. William Wilson) Another said that “this meeting with Jesus redeemed Zacchaeus' past, it transformed his present, and it redirected his future.” (On-line, Paul Scherer, Ibid.)

When Jesus came into his heart, Zacchaeus was never the same again. He was a new man, a giving man, a loving man, a forgiven man. And there was rejoicing in heaven!

So, what are we to make of this wonderful little Gospel story – these ten verses of scripture? Well, I think there are some powerful lessons we can take away with us. The first is this: God never stops seeking out those who are lost – never. Everyone else had given up on Zacchaeus, mostly with disgust; yet God never did. God was at work in his life through the power of His Holy Spirit, stirring up a

yearning in him for something more – a yearning that caused him to climb up that fateful tree.

I especially hope that those of you who are worried or concerned about someone who is lost hear that. I know that a lot of you worry about children or siblings or parents or friends who are on the wrong path. I know you worry about those who have seemingly turned away from God. Never forget, never forget that God has never turned away from them! He is always at work in their lives and in their world, wooing them, calling them, ready for that moment when they turn to come home. He never turns away even from those who turn away from Him!

That's the first thing I want us to remember. Secondly, Zacchaeus' story reminds us that there is no one beyond redemption, there is no one outside the arms of God's love. There is no one so evil, no one so despised, no one so sinful, that God doesn't love them. There is no situation that God cannot redeem.

I read, this week, a very touching story about a young woman who had to undergo surgery on her face. The surgeon had to cut a tiny twig of facial nerve to save this woman's life, but when he did, it left her mouth twisted. Sadly, when she asked the surgeon if it would always be like that, he replied, "Yes, because I had to cut the nerve." The woman nodded and was silent, but her husband, who was standing by her side, smiled at her, and said, "I like it. It's kind of cute." And her surgeon watched in wonder as he bent down and twisted his lips to accommodate hers, to show her that their kiss would still work.

And the one who told their story said, "I can't get that story out of my mind, because when I think of that young wife, I see this little man, Zacchaeus, his soul twisted, tormented by the pain of sin. And when I see the young husband twisting his lips to kiss his wife's paralyzed mouth, I see our Savior, the Christ, bending down, condescending to meet Zacchaeus where he lived. Is this not the Gospel story?" (Ibid)

Indeed, is it not the Gospel story? No one is beyond redemption, Christ reaches out to meet us where we are, and take us where we need to be.

And finally, I hope that this Zacchaeus story will compel us to rejoice when others come to Christ, rather than question or judge. I hope when someone walks into this church, we welcome them and rejoice that they're here, instead of question how they look or what they're wearing. I hope when they come to Christ, we don't question whether it's for real. And, maybe most of all, I hope we're never too quick to call others sinners while forgetting that we are all sinners in need of God's grace.

On a day long ago, a lonely, conflicted, sin-burdened little man named Zacchaeus climbed up a tree to get a look at Jesus. When Jesus called up to him, and he began to climb down, it was the first step in a whole new life, wrapped in the arms of God's grace.

My friends, if you find yourself, well, “up in a tree” today – a tree of sin or selfishness, or pain or whatever – know that Jesus is calling to you to come down, come into His arms, and know new life, forgiven life, abundant life, eternal life. It’s yours for the asking. Come down, take hold of His hand, and walk into a new future – forgiven and free. May it be so!

Amen.