

Sermon ✝ October 30, 2022

Luke 19:1-10

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As a young boy, one of the highlights of the summertime was the day the circus came to town: Ringling Brothers, Barnum and Baily. They didn't get any better than that.

It was always a very special time for me and my dad . . . filled with great anticipation and expectation. On the day the circus was to arrive, we would leave the house at dawn so that we could meet the train as it pulled into the station . . . that assured our being there to watch as they unloaded the elephants from their boxcar. I don't know why, but elephants have always been one of my favorite animals. We then watched as the performers and the animal handlers made preparation for the circus parade . . . which would take them from the train station to the empty field at the edge of town where they would set up the big top.

Now because we always watched them getting ready for the parade, we were usually late in finding *our spot* along the parade route. And being the short, stocky little kid that I was, I could never see over the heads of the adults and bigger children in front of me.

And my father wasn't all that tall either; so he too, missed much of the parade. We had to peer through the spaces between the bodies in front of us so as to catch glimpses of the clowns and camels and lions. But when it was time for the elephants, dad always reached down and lifted me to his shoulders. For a few moments I was six-feet-three and looking eye to eye at the elephants . . . life was good.

Our gospel lesson for today also tells of us a parade of sorts and of a short man who wanted to watch . . . so he climbed a tree. The Gospel of Luke records the story of a crowd of people who stood on tiptoed hopes in the oasis town of Jericho.

Their expectations had substance: reports of miraculous healings and dynamic teachings had made their way to this citrus-producing town. The caravans of merchants who peddled their produce in the Galilean region had spread the word about this one called Jesus.

Expectations had soared. Jericho was a thriving and wealthy city; it was a plum assignment for the upwardly mobile, opportunistic tax collector Zacchaeus.

Here revenues would be plentiful. Being the chief tax collector meant that he received a handsome rake-off from all of the subordinates who had squeezed money out of the suppressed Jews.

The Romans preferred using Jews like Zacchaeus for the collection of the imperial taxes, for he would take the brunt of the hostility as one who had betrayed his own people.

This man paid an enormous emotional price for being at the top of the revenue chain.

Zacchaeus had another problem: he was unusually short. Curious about this supposed Messiah who was entering his city, Zacchaeus, too, wanted to witness the parade. And so, this little man of Jericho was thus relegated to one isolated spot . . . up a tree and out on a limb.

Have you ever felt like you were there with Zacchaeus? Up a tree and out on a limb. Have you ever felt isolated from the faith family that gave you birth and disturbed by the moral contradictions within your own conscience?

John Charles Cooper was a writer, a professor, a student of Paul Tillich who was his Ph.D. advisor and an ordained Lutheran pastor. He wrote a number of theology/philosophy type books in the 1960's, 70's and 80's. Written in 1973, *Religion After Forty*, shares his own struggles with middle-age while analyzing the postwar generation of which he was a part. Cooper referred to the 1970's as "*an age of anxious emptiness*" and an era of "*spiritual and moral rootlessness.*" He cited the moral ambiguities of the Viet Nam War and the skepticism of Watergate, the sexual revolution of the sixties and the "me decade" of the seventies.

What I find fascinating about this book is that it could have been written this year. We could substitute Afghanistan for Viet Nam and for Watergate . . . take your pick. I actually find this kind of depressing as it tells me that we haven't learned much in the ensuing decades.

We are still up a tree as we long for the unconditional acceptance that we see in the eyes of the man from Nazareth who still travels our Jericho boulevard.

Zacchaeus is that diminutive figure up a tree who represents each of us who sometimes feel "up and out."

But, take heart, for there is more to this story. As the parade rounded the curve and approached a certain sycamore tree, the procession stopped. The Galilean gazed up into the blank eyes of an isolated man and said calmly, "*Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.*"

Shock waves spread through Jericho. To have a meal with a stranger was paramount to establishing a covenant of special friendship. And, before Jesus could articulate the meaning of his invitation, Zacchaeus "*came down quickly and received him with joy.*"

The Zacchaeus who had climbed up that tree was not the same man who leaped down. Without prompting or receiving suggestions from the Galilean teacher, Zacchaeus announced, "*Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over.*"

He was a changed person. Zacchaeus encounter with Jesus resulted in a radically new self-image. No longer could he view life in the perspective of self-aggrandizement. Relationships were suddenly more important than power or control.

Through the eyes of Jesus, he gazed into the very image of God (the *imago Dei*). In that reflection, he saw the Zacchaeus he was meant to be.

If we allow it to happen, the eyes of Christ can pull us down from our elevated tree-limb of isolation. And if we allow it, we will never be whole . . . apart from fellowship with and *service to* the people of God.

What is the identity of the person whom Christ wants you and me to be?

There is a glow about the face of each Zacchaeus who comes down from the tree of self-chosen isolation.

And the church is that one place, through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, where both we and Zacchaeus can dine with him who creates within us a new image - -the reflection of our unlimited possibilities.

Let us come down with him and break the bread of the covenant and receive the true stature of our real self. Amen.