

Sermon: "Up a Tree"

Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

*He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So, he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So, he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, 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." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*    THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD.

As one who is short in stature myself, I have always taken pleasure in this charming and familiar story of Jesus' encounter with the wealthy, short, chief tax collector named Zacchaeus. Wee Zacchaeus is such a peculiar little man. It seems fitting to call him "Wee" the way a Scot might, or the way folks in the South sometimes call children named for a parent, "Little Walter or Little Anne". Even though he was a social outcast at the time, it is fun to think of wee Zacchaeus relaxing with the great saints and apostles of the early church. In a group photo, he would be sitting in the front row of the group, or better yet still hanging out in a tree with a big smile on his face. In ten short verses we learn a lot about this little man from Jericho. Not only is he rich; as chief tax collector, he is particularly despised by his fellow Jews. The chief tax collectors were known for colluding with Rome and for taking advantage of others to make a good profit for themselves.

If you were reading the Gospel of Luke from the beginning in one sitting, you would definitely not expect this story to end happily for Zacchaeus. Luke has had quite a few harsh things to say about rich people before this story comes along. Early in the Gospel, Jesus blesses the poor but warns the rich, saying, "But woe to you who are rich, for you have received your consolation" (6:24). In chapter 12, he tells a parable of the rich farmer who hoped to build bigger barns in which to store all his crops, but that very night he was called to account by God. A few chapters later, he tells another parable, about Lazarus in heaven and the rich man in hell. In chapter 18, just before today's reading, the rich young ruler walks away from Jesus sad when he was told he must sell all he had and give it to the poor.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem to face his death when he encounters this man, Zacchaeus, whom we might rightly expect him to rebuke. Jesus is always welcoming the wrong people and confounding the good righteous people.

If wee Zacchaeus had been like the Pharisee in the parable in chapter 18:9-14, self-righteous and pompous, then Jesus probably would have walked right by him. However, this important and disliked community businessman did something extraordinary. He had obviously heard a bit about this man Jesus who was coming through town. He wanted to get a look for himself, but those crowds got in the way. The crowd may have shunned or barricaded him because of what he did for a living. In any case, Zacchaeus is hindered from seeing Jesus. I guess he got tired of looking at the backs and bottoms of tunics and put his pride aside to get a good view. He dashed ahead of Jesus and climbed a sycamore tree, whose low branches made it a good climbing tree for a little man.

"Ah, now I can see him". What a shock for Jesus to stop and give Zacchaeus the honor of staying at his house that night. The social outcast responds to this with great joy! When the good church folks grumble that Jesus is staying with a sinner, Zacchaeus stands up on his feet, stretches up as tall as he can, and declares that he will give half his possessions to the poor. What is more, he will repay any fraud fourfold. This goes far beyond what Jewish law demanded. Furthermore, Zacchaeus makes his commitment not with a frown on his

face, but with a light heart and a smile. Jesus declares that “salvation has come to this house” (V.9), because Zacchaeus is indeed a child of Abraham just like the grumblers.

The story of Zacchaeus tells us that the gospel is about serious commitment to God, but it is also about joy. We good church folks do not always do joy very well. Zacchaeus’s little stand and big smile convict us to do better. Communion is serious business, but it also a celebration. The word “Eucharist” means thanksgiving. As we share the elements with each other and say words like “Bread of Heaven” and “Cup of Salvation”, a good response is, “Thanks be to God!” We respond to Jesus’ invitation to the table with joy because we are included in God’s family.

The story of Zacchaeus also tells us something about looking for Jesus, even as he is looking for each one of us. It is comforting to remember the last word Jesus says in this story: “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost” (V.10). Our salvation is not contingent on our efforts – thanks be to God!

This reassurance does not mean that we may remain totally passive, going through life without a thought how we can take a step toward Jesus as he walks a mile to find us time and again.

The stories of how each of us looks for God are going to be more varied than the Aaron-to-Zacchaeus stories in the Bible, but we can take a few tips from wee Zacchaeus. He humbles himself by running and climbing a tree. Zacchaeus was not thinking of appearances. He was thinking about Jesus. He was not trying to be anyone but himself. He just wanted to see Jesus. The crowds were getting in the way, so he climbed a tree. As we try to follow Christ in worship, in our work lives, or in the marketplace, we can remember a happy saint of the church: wee Zacchaeus. We may not have to climb a tree to see Jesus above the crowd – Jesus will find us anyway. If however, you are finding yourself tired of staring at the backs of the crowd, look for your tree to climb.

If graced with a memorable encounter with God, perhaps your response will be as joyous as Zacchaeus’s, and it will lead to your own kind of cheerful commitment to justice. “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

#### PRAYER:

O Lord Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, the life: Do not let us stray from you, the Way, nor to distrust you, the Truth, nor to rest in anything other than you, the Life. AMEN

#### BENEDICTION:

Zacchaeus, whose name derives from the Hebrew for “Clean” or “Innocent”, is in the end declared saved. Salvation has come to “his house” because he has repented, changed his ways, and come to follow Jesus. This is the very purpose of Jesus’ life and ministry, “to save the lost” (V10). GO IN PEACE