

“Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus”

Luke 19:1-15

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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Matt Matthews

When’s the last time you climbed a tree?

Even from the low branches of a tree, it changes your perspective. A fresh angle. A fresh look. You see everything differently.

Zacchaeus is too short to see over the crowds, and he wants to see Jesus, so he runs—not walks—and climbs a sycamore tree. From that vantage, not only does he see Jesus, but Jesus sees him. Jesus pronounces that he will stay at Zacchaeus’ house that night. Zacchaeus climbs down and is happy to welcome Jesus.

We are glad. They are glad. Readers of this story for the last 2,000 years have been glad. A connection has been made. But there’s more; the connection gets deeper.

Zacchaeus wants Jesus to know that he’s going to give half of what he owns to the poor. Furthermore, if he has ever defrauded anyone, he’ll pay back what he owes plus four times the amount.

Jesus says, “Salvation has come to this house.” And he reminds Zacchaeus and the crowd what was always true. “You are a child of Abraham.”

Gladness all around. Everybody is beaming.

Except the crowd

The grumbling crowd takes aim at Jesus, making note that Jesus is once again associating with “tax collectors and sinners.”¹

And Jesus is one-hundred-percent guilty. He is guilty of hanging out with, seeking, eating with, and befriending sinners: tax collectors, prostitutes, unclean lepers, marginalized women. Jesus came to reach out to those who had so long felt unreachable. He had come to knock down dividing walls.

The crowd takes aim at Zacchaeus, who is a Jewish businessman who collects taxes from Jews for the occupying Roman government. As such, Zacchaeus is a traitor to his own people, and, possibly, ritually unclean.

Luke’s point is that Jesus digs outsiders. Jesus’ reach is far and wide. Jesus loves people with God’s love that we might not think are worthy of God’s love.

This is a meaningful—even fun—story for everybody except the dissatisfied crowd. We like seeing Zacchaeus’ eagerness, his comic bravery, his willingness even to climb trees, and his earnest desire to live justly when it came to his money. We like seeing Jesus welcome the outsiders, and we are hopeful that Jesus might still accept outsiders like us. And we even like watching the crowd blow its top.

¹ Earlier in Jericho (in chapter 18), Jesus takes time out to heal a blind man—and why else would the man be blind if it were not because of sin? Earlier in chapter 18, Jesus takes time out for children. Jesus tells a parable comparing an arrogant Pharisee and a humble tax collector in worship; the tax collector is the hero.

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When's the last time you climbed a tree?

This text dares us—figuratively speaking—to climb a tree, to look afresh at a world that we think we fully know but, mostly, don't even see. We gain perspective when we climb a tree.

Perspective is what we gain in those nano-seconds when our car is sliding out of control on ice; we realize not only are we out of control, but the priorities of two seconds ago are no longer as urgently important.

- When the doctor says the test results aren't good, we gain a moment of perspective.
- When the daughter calls and says, "You're going to be a grandmother" . . .
- When the underdog wins the series . . .
- When a sunset in the mountains grabs us with its beauty . . .

. . . we gain a fresh, enlightened perspective.

These tree-top moments offer a perspective of transcendence. From a higher advantage, we catch a clearer glimpse of what until that second was obstructed from our view.

A Sunday when we collect our pledge cards, I think, is one of those tree-top moments. We see lots of stuff that ordinarily we might miss. Walking forward together, we see that we are in this together. We see many hands reaching out, and not only our hands but the hands of the communion of saints reaching beyond the ages. We see God's hands reaching both to send us out into the world and to welcome us home. We see that we are part of the wider church of Jesus Christ and that God most definitely will use and bless our efforts as we come together to worship and to serve.

That's what I see, from way up here in this pulpit crafted of wood and rubbed smooth by the hands of preachers I'll never know.

When's the last time you climbed a tree, got out of your rut, looked beyond the grindstone, took in the wider view, paused to breathe, to slow down, to drink it in?

From up in that sycamore tree, Zacchaeus looks down upon the crowd of people. He sees the thick knot of people at the bend in the road. At the center, he begins to make out the source of their attention. To his delight, he's able to pick out Jesus at the center of that crowd. He sees Jesus see him; there's that flash of recognition when their eyes catch. On the ground and face to face with Jesus, Zacchaeus sees that he belongs to the wider family of God, that God loves even outsiders like him, and that he has a role to play in bearing that welcome and that love to others.

This is the sort of thing you're likely to see when you climb a tree, settle in the low branches, and look for God.

AMEN.

Luke 19:1-10

¹He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When 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." ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."⁸Zacchaeus 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." ⁹Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."