

Rev. Jerry Deck
Luke 19:1 – 10

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Roots
The Man Who Didn't Have Any Friends

It's really not all that surprising that they included the story of Zacchaeus in The Jesus Storybook Bible because this is a story that kids jump into pretty quickly. First, of course, there's the great children's song that goes along with the story. Do you know it? There's a tree to climb and most kids love to think about climbing trees, or well, anything. And then, of course, there's the fact that he's short and if there's one thing that kids understand it's the challenges of being short. And so though Zacchaeus is not actually a child, in many ways he represents the struggles of being a child in an adult world, always missing out on things that others get to see or do. And so he's almost a champion of the little people in his resourcefulness to see who he wants to see.

Now from the very beginning this is a pretty fascinating story. Luke wants us to be clear up front about what we're dealing with when it comes to Zacchaeus and so he begins by telling us that he is a tax-collector and that he's rich. As you probably know tax collectors were not exactly the most looked up to of professions, especially in this day and age. He would have been looked at as being not only greedy, but also (by many) as being a traitor to the Jewish people for working on behalf of the much hated Romans.

It's also though important to know that just a few paragraphs before this story Jesus has told his disciples that it's harder for a rich man to get to heaven than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. So, if you're listening to this story for the first time and you hear about this short man named Zacchaeus who is a tax-collector (boo!) and who is rich, then you are already beginning to assume that you know exactly where this story is going. In fact, if you're being honest, you're probably grabbing some popcorn and getting excited to watch this show about how Jesus tells Zacchaeus everything you've always wanted to say to the rich tax collectors that you know and hate.

And so, Zacchaeus finds this sycamore tree and he decides to climb it in order to see Jesus. It's important to give Zacchaeus some credit here that he is actively seeking out Jesus. I mean the fact that he's running would have been looked down upon because proper men didn't run and certainly didn't climb trees. But Zacchaeus doesn't seem to care. He's heard about this Jesus obviously and he wants to figure out what exactly he's about. He wants to investigate for himself, see for himself, exactly who this Jesus is.

But it's also interesting that he has decided to climb, of all trees, a sycamore tree. Now the sycamore tree would have been a great tree for Zacchaeus to climb because it has low branches that would have made it easier for a wee man like himself to have climbed up into. But the other interesting thing is that it is a very leafy tree which means, as scholars have pointed out, that it would have been an easy tree in which to climb and remain hidden. So, what we see here then, is a man who wants to see Jesus but is not yet sure

that he wants to be seen *by* Jesus. And I think that's a fascinating thing to think about because my guess is that Zacchaeus is not alone in that.

In fact, I think that there are a lot of seekers of Jesus, perhaps even some here today, who are understandably intrigued by Jesus and that is a wonderful thing. That is the right place to begin, by asking who is this guy? And here at ZPC we want to be a place where folks can freely come in and begin to discover who this Jesus is, begin to see Jesus. But one of the things that happens is that as that journey goes along at some point we have to ask whether we're going to allow Jesus to really see us, to invite him in, in other words. Because in order to really understand faith and discipleship at some point we have to be willing to stop simply watching Jesus and start following him. And that can be a very vulnerable thing.

I love what happens here which is that Jesus tells Zacchaeus that he is going where? Not to Jesus' house or to a friend of Jesus' house, but to Zacchaeus' house. And he is to go quickly. No time to vacuum or sweep or dust or clean the toilets. And that is remarkably vulnerable. This last week we've had some friends coming over in order to see the baby and when they come in what's the first thing we say? Sorry we haven't had a chance to pick up or we've been otherwise engaged or don't mind the dust. We do this, of course, because we're kind of embarrassed, we feel vulnerable, we don't want people to think that we aren't, well, perfect. We like to hide, in other words.

But we have this great image here where Jesus says, "It's time to stop hiding, it's time to stop pretending, it's time to stop watching from afar." Stop waiting until you're cleaned up or your house is in order or until you think you understand everything about me, it's time to get started now. Not tomorrow or next week, but now. Get off the tree and let's go.

And that's exactly what Zacchaeus does. He hustles down and he takes Jesus straight to his house. He stops looking from afar, jumps down and jumps into a journey with Jesus. And it isn't long into that journey that we already see what begins to happen when you stop just looking from afar which is that Jesus begins to work through you, begins to change you. Jesus says that salvation has come and he says that why? Because Zacchaeus has allowed Jesus into his life. And we see that demonstrated in the way that Zacchaeus begins looking beyond himself. By promising to repay what he has taken from others he is demonstrating his love for neighbor. And again, as we have been talking about of late, this is Zacchaeus joining in the kingdom of God as he loves God and neighbor.

This is a great story, it seems to me, for those who are looking for Jesus, who are drawn to Christ, because it paints in such a vivid way what that journey looks like. In other words, it is an excellent story for those who are considering whether or not to begin the journey. But as I've thought about this story more I think it also is an important one for those of us who have perhaps been on this journey for a little while. I mean if we as a church believe that a part of our mission is to help others become a part of this faith journey then one of the questions this story should provoke is, "Why in the world Zacchaeus was so curious about Jesus in the first place?" What was it that would make him run to the tree and climb

up the tree so that he could see Jesus? Isn't this what we want people to do here at ZPC? Don't we want people to come here because they are so curious about this Jesus that they see us follow?

It's a vital question. Of course, there are some easy answers that we might throw out there. Perhaps Zacchaeus has heard about the miracles that Jesus has done and so he wants to get a closer look at this miracle worker. Or perhaps it's just that Jesus is popular and so perhaps he (as someone who is popular for all the wrong reasons) wants to see what makes Jesus so special. I suppose that those could be the reasons. But as I have thought about that question a bit more I was drawn to the crowd's reaction to Zacchaeus and Jesus eating together. They grumbled, we are told, about the fact that Jesus would eat with the likes of a guy like him, a tax-collector. And it reminded me of a story that occurs earlier in Jesus' ministry that Luke tells. It's back in chapter 5 and we're told that Jesus meets a guy named Levi who happened to be...a tax collector. And guess what Jesus does with him. He eats with him at this great banquet. But not just him. He eats, we are told, with a large crowd of tax collectors. And guess what the Pharisees and teachers of the law (the church folk, if you will) said about that. Well, they grumbled. "Why," they asked, "do you eat and drink with tax collector and sinners?"

And as I've thought about that more I couldn't help but think that this is exactly the reason why Zacchaeus wanted to see this Jesus. More than the fame of Jesus or Jesus' miracles, Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus because he had heard that he was a man who was willing to eat with the likes of him, no matter what others said. I mean Zacchaeus could have gone to the synagogue, to church if you will, to hear about God, but he didn't do that. He could have made an appointment to meet with his local priest or Pharisees, but he knew how that would end. And so he ran, he climbed a tree, to see this Jesus who would eat, drink and simply be with him. And that, it seems to me, is something for us to hear.

A short while back I heard a story about one of our ZPC students, one of our covenant children. It was, it seems to me, a providential story for me to hear. The story goes that our students were encouraged on a Sunday to step out of their comfort zones that week and do something for the Lord, no matter how hard it might be. And so later that week this student was in the school cafeteria, eating and surrounded by friends, by people she liked and enjoyed. But she noticed in the midst of that a student who was sitting over by herself, alone at another table.

The student suggested that perhaps they could invite the girl over to their table, but that was met with a less than enthusiastic response. And so, this student and another friend, packed up their lunches and walked over to eat with this girl who had been all alone, this girl who had no one to eat with. Now if you remember school cafeteria's you know that scene well and, if you're honest, you know how hard that would have been.

And later as they reflected on this experience there were two things that our ZPC student said. One, how cool it was that God had given her this opportunity to serve God and two, how difficult it was to do this when her friends had disapproved of it.

As I thought about that story, a couple things came to my mind. First, I was incredibly impressed that one of our covenant children was leading the way in that. It's this great reminder that what we are doing here matters. I mean that took courage to walk across the cafeteria and sit at a table with someone who didn't have anyone else. To be willing to abandon your own desires, and the desires of your friends, in order to reach out to someone else.

But the 2nd thing it made me think about is the simple fact that even after we're done with school, in many ways, the experience of the school cafeteria never stops, it just looks fancier. We see this in society, right? We move into neighborhoods with people who look a lot like folks we're comfortable with, folks we want to eat with. We shop at places with people who like and can afford the same things. Other than a few outliers (who are usually folks we knew back when we were in school) we are Facebook friends with people whose opinions and tastes are just like our own. We join leagues and clubs and on and on because they are our cafeteria buddies.

And unfortunately, the church has joined in this cafeteria mentality. That's not new, of course. I mean this is what the crowds, the Pharisees and other church leaders did in Jesus' time, right? Prostitutes you eat at this table. Tax Collectors you dine at that table. Good church folks you eat at that table over there. It seems to me that we've taken this to an even deeper level, to our own demise.

We either spend time trying to make our table as exciting and entertaining as possible so that more people will join us at our table (people, mind you, who look and think like us) or we spend time parsing out whether or not we think the people who are at our table should really be there or whether we should ask them to go to a different one.

So, we end up with our own little pharisaical tables. We have a contemporary music table and a choir table and a white middle-class table and a Presbyterian table and a non-denom table and a conservative Christian table and a progressive Christian table and on and on our cafeteria tables go. Meanwhile we have Zacchaeus' and seekers and tax collectors and prostitutes and poor and lost people scattered throughout the cafeteria and community, but we are too busy protecting our tables to even notice or care. And then we act confused or get angry that society around us seems to not be interested in us. Is it any surprise that, unlike Jesus, we don't pique the curiosity of anyone beyond ourselves?

What are you saying, Jerry? That music or denominations or particular theologies are unimportant? No, not at all. I certainly have my own opinion on each of those things. But I am saying that when those things become more important to us than seeking out those who are in need of the love of Jesus then it begins to reek of the school cafeteria. And before we get too caught up in any of those things, we might want to make sure that we aren't so concerned with who is or is not at our table that we miss everyone out there who might just be looking for someone who will love them despite who they are or where they've been.

Brothers and sisters, I think this is a story that children should love and that adults should be frightened of. For children, of whatever age who are curious and wondering about this Jesus, it invites them to join in a journey with him. And for those of us who have been on the journey for a while, the adults if you will, it is a challenge asking whether or not we are willing for him to turn over our tables (as he is apt to do) so that our eyes will be open to the people that Jesus see and to the people that Jesus has called us to love.