

## An Interruption in Jericho

Luke 19:1-10

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Generations of Sunday school children have grown up singing the refrain: "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he." Part of the fun is the smooth whirling sound that wee makes when rolling off our lips. A young child can get pretty excited by the idea of a grown-up as short as a kid, someone who is also lucky enough to actually have Jesus come to his house.

Zacchaeus is small in stature to most of our minds. And he has become rich through means that scarcely do justice to the true meaning of his Hebrew name, which is "the righteous one." Writer and theologian Frederick Buechner refers to Zacchaeus as the "sawed-off little social disaster with a big bank account and a crooked job."

But was he really short? The Greek text is ambiguous and doesn't make clear whether the "he" of short stature is Jesus or Zacchaeus. All we know is that the crowd got in the way of Zacchaeus' sight lines. So, he climbed a tree.

It's possible that Jesus was the short one. According to Isaiah's prophecy, the Messiah possessed no particular physical beauty or desirability. Time and again we see Jesus stooping to the least and worst of society. His capacity to get down to our level is one of the distinguishing marks of salvation - God bending low, of coming down to our level. Tall people don't stoop so easily.

But scholarly debates about height probably miss the point of this story. The Greek word used here for stature, *helikia*, can also mean maturity or character. Zacchaeus certainly seemed short on maturity and small on character. One had to be, to be a tax collector. It meant working for the Romans. And some of a tax collector's greatest wealth came by impoverishing others.

Zacchaeus was the *chief* tax collector for the Roman government in this prospering city, we are told. He probably had a staff of collectors, and he was, very possibly, the most hated man in Jericho. He was regarded as a traitor to his own people. He and his cohorts could stop a person in Jericho and assess duties on nearly everything in his or her possession. A cart, for instance, could be taxed for each wheel, for the animal that pulled it, and for the merchandise that it carried.

Mr. Zacchaeus was a climber of more than trees. In all likelihood, he was a social climber who knew every political and economic ladder in town. Worse than ignoring the poor, some well-supplied, well-fed, and well-educated folks actually punish people for their poverty. That was Zacchaeus. Average folks regard them with contempt. Zacchaeus knew what it took to keep struggling people low.

Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, and his journey gets interrupted in Jericho. He sees Zacchaeus, and orders him down from both the tree and his "high horse." This is what Jesus does best. He goes after people and doesn't wait for their initiative. He bids us with an urgency to come and follow. Why? Because salvation—wholeness-- is not a future thing: it begins right now in the daily run of our lives. The best way to be in on this salvation is to heed the call of Jesus. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." Notice Jesus' soft touch for inviting himself over.

For his part, Zacchaeus has no time to put his house in order and get ready for his guest. The new granite countertops still have the unwiped crumbs of last night's food. Dishes are piled

high in the stainless-steel sink. No one at home knows the Lord is coming for lunch. But something about Jesus demanding a personal encounter with Zacchaeus awakens a special joy within him. It isn't a "wanton, selfish gladness," to quote the old hymn "God of Grace and God of Glory." Zacchaeus, rather, is "rich in things and poor in soul," and he knows it.

The power of salvation is never dependent on our lives looking orderly and all put together. We don't have to tidy things up before the Lord will act on our behalf. This is the good news of the gospel. Jesus simply looks up at this climber, catches his eye, and beckons him to follow.

Well, Zacchaeus wasted no time scrambling down from that tree, and he "welcomed him gladly." I'm sure he did. No one came calling for Zacchaeus unless it was to complain...and houseguests-they had to be a rare exception to his lonely life.

I suppose Zacchaeus could have stayed up in that tree and rebuffed Jesus' invitation. Plenty of people do. It is certainly much easier to go on with our life and to continue with our agenda than to allow a Messiah to invite himself over for lunch and delve into our inner core. That is risky business to allow such a person into that part of us where our true self resides. Most of us can resist. But Zacchaeus takes the chance and invites Jesus into his inner room. It was a lunch to remember.

For the townsfolks who are watching this jaw dropping spectacle, this was a bitter pill to swallow. What kind of so-called Messiah would even acknowledge, much less eat with the most notorious sinner in town? Luke says they began to "murmur," to "mutter"...you can count on that, and plenty more.

We really don't know what happened at Zacchaeus' house. All we see are the results, and those results tell us a great deal. Zacchaeus makes a two-pronged pledge: to address institutional injustice, he elects to give half of his possessions to the poor. To remedy the personal injustice through which he wronged others, he moves to make fourfold reparations. to give half his yearly income to the poor and to return any stolen funds four times over. Jewish law only required restitution of the money plus twenty percent...but Zacchaeus thought four hundred percent interest was more appropriate.

Something in that encounter with Jesus changed the way Zacchaeus saw the world. He could now see people in need where before he only saw people he needed to fleece. Is that not one of the most dangerous things Jesus does to our eyes? He changes how we see other people. No longer do labels work...poor, rich, Democrat, Republican, white, black, transgender...now we see people who are as needy as we are. Now we see real people with real needs. We see glimpses of this when a disaster occurs. Let a hurricane blow through or a twister touch down or a plane fall from the sky, and people rally to the support of neighbors and strangers without concern for their social status or skin color or partisan affiliation or gender identity. It is to see with the eyes of Jesus.

Salvation comes to Zacchaeus' house, and he is forever changed from a taker to a giver. 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.

As a pastor, I've observed it time and again. When Christ takes up residence in a life, we become generous. Somehow, he loosens our grip on our wallet, our pocketbook, our credit card. Giving becomes an opportunity, not just a requirement.

I would even suggest that no person has had an authentic encounter with the living Christ unless a generous heart is the result. Please don't tell me how many years you've been a member of this church, instead, let me see your 1040 tax return that details your charitable donations. Tell

me how you spend your free time. Fill me in on your plans for retirement. If all that is about you and yours, if it's all self-serving, then maybe it's time to see that Jesus is inviting himself for lunch at your house.

As a result of that encounter with Jesus, for Zacchaeus, a 50% tithe seemed an appropriate response. You and I are invited to decide for ourselves what our response will be.

Professor Paul Scherer, in describing this story, says that this meeting with Jesus "redeemed Zacchaeus' past, it transformed his present, and it re-directed his future." Isn't that what God wants to do with all of us? This is the story of the power of the grace of God to genuinely change a human being. Found only in Luke, it turns out to be a reproduction in miniature of the mission of Jesus: received by the outcast, condemned by the authorities...and that murmuring crowd, well, it follows him all the way to Jerusalem.

It starts with a little man perched in a tree. And it ends with the biggest heart Jesus encounters in all of Israel.

Jesus is coming to our town as well. He has an agenda: to seek us out, to bring wholeness to our lives, and to partner with him to address the injustices of our world. He invites us to climb a tree and to see what he is up to. He may even stop beneath the tree where you sit...no matter how comfortable or complacent or secure or even immobile you may be.

He may look at you and invite you down...down to fellowship with him, down to the opportunity to be made whole. For some of us, it will take some courage to get out of that tree, In the end, Jesus declares that salvation has come to the house of Zacchaeus...that he, too, is a son of Abraham. He was just lost. He had gotten confused about why he was here, and whom he was to serve, and that can happen to any of us.

O God, we too need you to redeem our past, to transform our present, and to redirect our future. Call us out of the places we sit today and show us how to be the people you would have us be. Amen.