

I confess that this incident in which Jesus and Zacchaeus encounter one another is probably my all-time favorite Bible story, it reveals so much about who Jesus is and how Jesus deals with all of us. For me it gets to the very heart of our faith and offers us an opportunity to experience for ourselves exactly all it means for us to trust Jesus as Savior and Lord. As we delve into this encounter today ask yourself this question: Where are we in this story?

Are we part of that crowd? In the crowd, close to the action but with safety in numbers, sure but not too sure of ourselves, hoping that we are in the right place to see Jesus up close! Hoping like all the folks on a rope line that the main person – the President, the Queen, Jesus will stop for a chat with us! Do we feel that we are with the important, respected people, who will end up grumbling, when “horror of horrors” Jesus chooses to eat not with them, but with the despised tax collector? Are we like the crowd, mere onlookers, spectators, sometimes dismayed, disgusted, or confused, when God seems to pay more attention to unsavory people than God does to us, and we feel the resentment building in our bile!

Or are we Zacchaeus? Do we see ourselves in this marginalized, despised, shunned, pitiful little man who felt the pain of his isolation but who was also ready to do something about it, who had some... enough faith and determination, who was unwilling to let any crowd stand in his way, whose great need to see Jesus made him willing to further embarrass and isolate himself by climbing that tree. Climbing the tree – out of idle curiosity maybe or faith? What was it that propelled Zacchaeus to these giddy heights? Are we up that tree, are we Zacchaeus, hoping to catch a peek at this one we’ve heard so much about, anxious to see what Jesus has to offer?

Or are we Jesus himself? Like Jesus, we are unimpressed by wealth, and position, and status, and like Jesus we recall times when we have been impressed, even amazed, moved to laughter and joy, to tears and prayer, at the faith of someone who would not stop till they connected with God and God’s plan for them!

By the end of this day, seeing Zacchaeus called down from and out of his and our family tree we will discover that he would not have been happy with the sentiments of the following story, one that reads like a prayer, albeit a misguided, misdirected prayer: “I would like to buy \$5 worth of God, please – not enough to explode my soul or disturb my sleep, but enough to equal a cup of warm milk or a snooze in the sunshine. I don’t want enough of God to make me love an enemy or pick beets with a migrant; I want ecstasy, not transformation; I want the warmth of the womb, not a new birth. I want a pound of the eternal in a paper sack. I would like to buy \$5 worth of God, please.”

What about us? Are we to be satisfied with \$5 worth of God or are we ready, really ready to meet and be met by the incredible, gracious, Savior of our lives and Savior of the world – God come as one of us - Jesus Christ? Just when we started to think that we are unworthy of Christ’s attention, Jesus catches a glimpse of us out of the corner of his eye and says, “How about inviting me home for dinner?”

In that instant, the social tables were turned. Jesus had chosen to seek hospitality from the least likely person in town. This bold affirmation by Jesus shook Zacchaeus to his foundations. All the sneering and cajoling and ostracism and shame that had been heaped upon him was in that instant overcome by the grace of God expressed through Jesus. To this point nothing else had changed Zacchaeus. He was stuck, stuck in his ways, stuck up a tree. At one and the same time Zac was the victim and the

perpetrator, not yet ready to admit his failures, too scared to try to live justly and faithfully UNTIL the love of God expressed and offered to him in Jesus' act of acceptance tipped the balance. To know Jesus in such a way was more important than any cynical power Zacchaeus may have gained from his greed. In that moment, in being asked, and invited and in saying yes, Zacchaeus put his new faith into concrete action by declaring to set right the wrong he had done, and to more than compensate those whom he had defrauded and of whom he had taken advantage.

In the words from Jesus, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham", we have a clear statement of the ways Jesus understood the saving love of God. That salvation comes as we encounter God's love in Jesus, and this encounter changes our lives, moving us from greed and fear, to generosity and justice. To live by faith is to be a child of Abraham. As we trust in the Lord our fears are overcome, we see that our security does not lie in scheming or manipulating but in trusting God. Faith, a change of heart and the act of putting things right is what transforms us into children of Abraham, brothers with Jesus and brings salvation to our houses. Like Zacchaeus we are saved by someone doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves!

We are people who have been "up a tree, up our family tree" and we were and are at one and the same time both surprised and delighted that Jesus sought us out and found us, and turned our lives around. Now we are no longer up a tree but on the road with Jesus, in the game with Jesus, partners in ministry together with Jesus, now we are to be calling and inviting, embracing and welcoming, giving and offering so that through us Jesus can call other Zacchaeus' down from their trees and into the life of the faith and into the church, the worshipping, serving community of God's people. Now we need to be getting best fit, training and preparing to carry out this calling that we have from God.

I recently came across this exercise to build muscle strength in the arms and shoulders. It seemed so good, that I thought you would all like it. It is suggested that you do this exercise three days a week. Begin by standing on a comfortable surface, where you have plenty of room at each side. With a 5-lb. potato sack in each hand, extend your arms straight out from your sides, and hold them there as long as you can. Try to reach a full minute, then relax. Each day, you'll find that you can hold this position for just a bit longer. After a couple of weeks, move up to 10-lb. potato sacks. Then 50-lb. potato sacks, and eventually work on lifting a 100-lb. potato sack in each hand and hold your arms straight for more than a full minute. After you feel confident at that level, put a potato in each of the sacks! But, be careful!

As well as calling all of us to come down out of our tree, our family tree, Jesus is challenging us to do and live differently. Jesus is asking us to exercise our faith – and it will require more than holding up some empty potato sacks. We are being asked to exercise our faith by sharing Jesus' life and values, by offering Jesus' charity and welcome to those overlooked by society, by living Jesus' compassion for the hurting and the vulnerable, by expressing Jesus' concern for the life of the community and the very fabric of creation.

In the reading from Isaiah 1, God's people had not been doing what God wanted. WE may have felt okay about this reading because it sounded like God was fussing at the rulers of Sodom and Gomorrah for that is what the text said BUT this message was for Israel – God was saying that Israel behaving like those who were not trusting in Yahweh. They were pretending to care about serving God, but deep down they didn't care at all. They made a great show out of worshipping God, but then they were mean to one another and cheated each other. So God got angry and said, "I'm sick and tired of what

you're doing. I've had enough of you showing off – I'm waiting for something real! I want you to show me that you know how to be kind and fair, that you know how to love one another." God is always looking for us to have a faith which is expressed by ceasing to do evil, learning to do good; seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow. And God looks to us to show our generosity by offering of our best, not holding anything back to try and make a point to someone or anyone, not using our offerings to God as some sort of political football. These are God's values, values that we need to apply to every aspect of our lives and which we need to express in all aspects of community life.

I had gotten at least far in this sermon and then on Friday I had my annual physical at the doctor – I had to fast from midnight so right after the doctor poked and prodded I was off to the Waffle House. WH was packed, I hate sitting at the counter but that was the only place so I levered my way in there and gave my order. Ham and cheese omelet, an order of raisin toast and hash browns, scattered, smothered, covered.... Oh and black coffee – got to watch my cholesterol! Waitresses asked if I wanted any meat – I said no, and noted to one of my neighbors that I hoped the ham in the omelet was meat. He smiled and then asked me where I was from and then what did I do. Told him I was a Presbyterian Minister – his eyes sort of twinkled at this as he said, "Really!" Then he told me about how he had been a member in a Presbyterian church – not Oakland Avenue – and how he felt run out from that church because he sensed people looked down on him because he worked with his hands and tools and felt excluded by the high and mighty. I said I was sorry that had happened, that the church should never be like this that it upset me any time I heard such a story. Right there in Waffle House I felt like I was calling him down not out of his tree but out of his stool at WH as I encouraged him and invited him to come try out our church and allow the church to have another chance.

These are the values about which we can read on many, many pages of the Scripture, these are the values that became flesh in Jesus, the values for which Jesus ultimately paid His life. These values - ceasing to do evil, learning to do good; seeking justice, rescuing the oppressed, defending the orphan, and pleading for the widow - grow out of, and express our relationship with and to our Savior, these values, and the God who leads is call us to step up in our level of devotion to all aspects of the ministry and mission of our church family described in and made possible by our 2011 Ministry and Mission Budget.

In many senses God is all grace, all a gift, but make no mistake we are in a battle, a battle with ourselves and within ourselves, over these values which God asks us to embody. One of the fiercest fronts in this battle involves that which our society values most highly– our wallets and pocketbooks, what we earn and own, what we have, and save and spend, that which we chose to call, "our wealth". This is why Jesus has more to say about our attitude to money than about any other topic. The battle that rages within us and around us is one which requires a serious, prayerful, faithful attitude from all of us. In this season as we make our pledges and as we make our offerings over the coming weeks and months and years we are invited to allow God's generosity to shape our understanding of God's values expressed in the life, the mission and ministry of our church – in all the programs, activities, missions, benevolences, classes, groups, services and relationships that can only happen as we all support every opportunity for love and service together by making a pledge and in being regular and committed in making our offerings.

Today, once again, Jesus, sees us where we are! In the crowd, on our own, up our tree, wherever we are!

Today, once again, Jesus invites us to climb down from our family tree where we have been hiding. Jesus invites us to join Him, to spend time together, to be fed and to be changed. Jesus looks each and all of us in the eye, straight in the eye and says:

ZACCHAEUS.. Anne ... Bill ... My love for you is so sure that I will go to another tree, a cross shaped tree and there offer my life for your life.

ZACCHAEUS.. Mary ... Marilyn ... My love for you is so sure that I ask you to be my followers turning away and aside from all other ways to go my way!

ZACCHAEUS.. Kelley ... Fred... My love for you is so sure that I ask you to give and offer to me and to the cause of my Kingdom your money, your time, your talents, your very lives!

ZACCHAEUS.. Jason... Wesley ... Polly ... My love for you is so sure that I ask you to be my followers turning away and aside from all other ways to go my way!

In this season as we present and have presented to God our pledges, our tithes and offerings Jesus invites us to make a new life together, Jesus has a calling for all of us, a mission that through us can be made possible. Jesus has strength to sustain us in this new life, Jesus has a place for you and Jesus wants you to do all that you can to make sure that there is also room for every other person.

Today still Jesus says, “Y’all, all y’all, hurry and come down; for I, Jesus, must stay at your house today.” Amen.