

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus 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."

Climbing, Climbing, Climbing - November 3, 2019

Luke 10:1-10

In the great song by The Who, "Behind Blue Eyes," Roger Daltrey sings, "Nobody knows what it's like to be hated, to be fated, to telling only lies But my dreams they aren't as empty, as my conscience seems to be." In these few words, what power! What introspection! This song tells the story of a man who is seen as somebody very different from who he sees himself to be. It is song for anyone who feels misunderstood, who feels stereotyped, who feels alone.

In short, it is a song that the subject of our scripture today, a man named Zacchaeus, might well understand.

Of all the people in Jesus' day, tax collectors had to be among those most hated. No one likes paying taxes, either back then or even today. But the system back then for collecting taxes was especially difficult. Every province of the Roman Empire was assigned a certain amount of money to send in every year. The land of Israel, where Jesus lived and worked, was part of the Roman province called Judea. The governor of Judea, to meet his obligation to Rome, would then sell the right to collect taxes to the highest bidders. In other words, say the governor had to send Rome one million dollars. He would then sell the rights to collect taxes in a designated area to local people, who paid the governor up front with their own money. The tax collectors, backed by the Roman Army, would then have the right to go out into their territory and essentially shake down the people for whatever they could get away with. So let's say a tax collector put in \$50,000 and had a territory of 2500 people. Well, that amounted to \$20 per person. However, the tax collector was free to charge whatever he wanted. So instead of \$20, he might charge \$25, or even \$30 and keep the difference for himself. All the while, he could ask the Roman soldiers to help him out, if someone didn't want to pay.

Quite a system! You can see why tax collectors were among the most hated people in society. Even if you were an "honest" tax collector and took only a small share for yourself, you were hated anyway! People just assumed that in whatever you asked for, you were cheating. So whether cheating or not, you could not be trusted. No wonder everyone hated Zacchaeus. Moreover, he was described as a chief tax collector, so everyone figured he must cheat and steal even more!

So yes, Zacchaeus was rich. He must have had a big house with all kinds of slaves and owned nice things and wore the best clothes and ate the best foods. Nevertheless, he was hated. He was hated so much that he was unwelcome at the temple. The religious establishment put tax collectors in the same category as prostitutes and other sinners. I think we all know people like Zacchaeus in

our own day, whether they are part of our families, or famous celebrities or politicians. You've really got to wonder how this man and others like him made it through the day.

But poor Zacchaeus, (yes, poor is not quite the right word) had another problem: he was short. In our day, I don't like describing being short of stature as a problem, but we know it is. Two thousand years after Jesus and we humans are still judging and making fun of anyone who is not "normal"—whatever that means. Maybe they are too short. Maybe they are too tall. Maybe they are too old, or too fat, or too skinny. Maybe they aren't "beautiful" in terms of having fashion model looks. We all know about body shaming and how there is a growing movement around the world to take pride in ourselves for being what we are and who we are and not accepting the judgement of a society obsessed with perfect bodies. Needless to say, we have a long way to go.

Certainly in Zacchaeus's day, there was no one to fight the body shamers of Jesus' day. No one who would look at Zacchaeus could accept him and respect him because of how he looked.

Thus the story of Zacchaeus the short rich tax collector, whom everybody hated. What kind of life did he have? What joy did he experience, if any? Did he have friends? Did he know whether his wife loved him for him or for his money? Did he ever think of moving to another place where nobody knew about his being a tax collector, but then realizing that he still would be short and still be made fun of? What good is having all the money in the world without love, or without respect?

But you know, there are times in our own lives when we can very much identify with Zacchaeus? Perhaps we aren't so superrich that everyone thinks we stole our money. Perhaps we are not short so that people laugh at us. Yet, every one of us has experienced times in our lives where we felt cut off from human society. Some of us have been falsely accused of a crime. Some of us have had so-called friends and even partners tell lies about us. Some of us have been blamed for something they never did. At the same time, most of us have had the terrible experience of being ridiculed over what our bodies look like, or what nationality we are, or what our sexual orientation is, or how we dress, or how we smell. Maybe it was only a few times. Maybe it's been a lifetime. We've all yearned for the teasing and hatred to stop. We all know it doesn't. Is it any wonder that the main reason young people commit suicide is because they fell like they are being bullied? They feel like they have no one with whom they can express their grief or pain or anger?

Now I'm not saying that nobody should ever be condemned by society. I'm not saying that there aren't people who are thieves, cheats, and criminals of all kinds who should rightly be judged and jailed. Zacchaeus was hardly the exemplar of righteous living and virtue and he deserved at least some of the hatred that he got.

Furthermore, I must also mention that for every person like Zacchaeus who deserved to be hated by society for what he did, there are many, many, more of us who hate themselves for what they have done or failed to do in their lives. I meet all kinds of people, young and old, rich and poor, gay and straight, who just plain don't like themselves — for whatever reason. Yes, I have no doubt that some of us here have done some terrible things in our lives. We have all done things we don't dare mention, even to the closest people we know. We carry with us a never-ending burden of guilt and self hatred that never seems to get lighter and we have no idea how to absolve ourselves.

Zacchaeus, like many of us, was an unhappy, dissatisfied man. Despite his wealth, he lived a life few would want to live. His only friends were other tax collectors just like him. Clearly something had to change. And for us who are struggling with guilt or something we did in the past or our own feelings of self-hatred and inadequacy, don't we long for something in life to change? Don't we long to be freed of the vicious, sometimes irrational judgement of society?

Apparently, Zacchaeus was. Long before Jesus entered Jericho, Zacchaeus had heard about him. As we know from dozens of passages in the gospels, Jesus had this reputation of hanging out with the people most of society despised. Jesus went to bars. Jesus was a friend of sinners of all kinds. Jesus, in the opinion of many religious leaders, was simply not respectable and should not be listened to.

But was precisely for those same reasons that Zacchaeus wanted to listen to what Jesus had to say. Throughout his life, Zacchaeus was a man who was rejected by society. He was a Jew. He was a child of Abraham. He felt that despite his occupation, he should have had some place in temple. Yet because of his job and probably because of his lack of height, he was told repeatedly that he didn't belong.

Now Zacchaeus was far from perfect. He even admitted to Jesus that he had stolen from people and taken much much more than his share. So when he heard about this strange new rabbi who ate with sinners, tax collectors and all the other rubble of society, he certainly was intrigued. Can it be? Could it be possible? Is there someone in the world who thinks that someone like me has a place? Might I actually belong?

Friends, don't we ask ourselves the same questions from time to time? Don't we ever wonder whether we are loved and cared about? When we experience the sometimes sudden and cruel rejections of life, don't we think of ourselves as worthless? When people hate us because of how we look, or how we talk, or the color of our skin, or whom we love, don't we wonder if we could in fact belong somewhere — anywhere.

The good news, friends, the reason why we are here, the reason why we can enter this place covered with the dirt and stains of the world but leave here at least partially restored is that Jesus loves you. Jesus loves me. Jesus does not look at us as what we are now, but looks at the beautiful, marvelous people we are able to be. Jesus loves us, you and me, as we are. Right now. No strings attached.

So, yes, short, hated, rich Zacchaeus, desperately wanted and needed to hear and personally experience the love of the God who made him. Zacchaeus, just like you, just like me, needed to be know that all was not lost — that he had a friend who looked beyond his occupation, looked beyond his physical appearance, looked beyond his past and welcomed him.

Zacchaeus finally admitted to himself that he needed God in his life and God came to him in the form of Jesus Christ. Every week during our worship, we begin with a time of confession. We say a prayer that admits quite frankly that we have separated ourselves from God by what we have done and what we have left undone. We have a time of silence to allow us to reflect, perhaps uncomfortably, on our lives and how they are going. We sing “Lord, have mercy” because it is the Lord and only the Lord who can give us the mercy, pardon, and reassurance we desperately need. Then, then, then, we hear the words we have been longing to hear. We hear the words our souls have been craving. We hear the magnificent, wonderful words — We — Are — Forgiven! How else can we respond but to sing “Glory to God” for forgiving us once again and allowing us the opportunity to start over.

The story of Zacchaeus is our story. Zacchaeus was a man who climbing: Climbing a tree to get a glimpse of the reality of Jesus. He was climbing out of a life of cheating and stealing to a life of honesty and fairness. And once he was forgiven and accepted by Jesus, he climbed out of his pit of anger and bitterness and despair and believed, truly believed, that he was loved, that he was worthy, that he was a child of God!

Friends, I invite you to climb, just like Zacchaeus. I invite you to climb out of your feelings of self-hatred and worthlessness. I invite you to climb into a world where you have the power and desire to start again. I invite you to climb into a wonderful, fulfilling, loving and grace-filled relationship with Jesus Christ. The same Jesus who loves us more than we can imagine and walks with us down every pathway of this journey we call life. And beyond.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.