

Traveling with Jesus sermon series

“Traveling Through Jericho”
(Zacchaeus Climbing the Sycamore Tree)

[Luke 19:1-10](#)

In today’s scripture reading we are told of a short but wealthy man from Jericho called Zacchaeus. In all other respects he was a seemingly healthy individual. He was not blind, nor paralyzed, or even suffering from Leprosy. He was neither deaf nor mute nor filled with demonic spirits. Nothing. He was in effect a pretty ordinary man. So, this story stands apart from many others and perhaps that is what makes it so very special and worthy of our careful attention.

From that story we might guess that his wealth was derived from his position as the chief tax collector. It would seem too that he was probably pretty good at that job given the united voice among the community that declared Zacchaeus a sinner as Jesus and he met near that sycamore- fig tree. Zacchaeus was not Jesus’ first encounter with a tax collector, however. Matthew, also known as Levi, who was the seventh disciple and who wrote the first gospel by the same name was also a tax collector. In order to relate to Zacchaeus’ experience of being universally despised we might think about the policeperson, health insurance representative, or dentist that we encounter. And while some of these professions may not cause a financial hardship like the tax collector, they are typically recognized for their near universal pain and angst that they inflict. I’m sure that you can think of others.

The synoptic gospels are replete with examples and commentary relating to the sinfulness of the tax collector. A brief survey of those texts finds that the tax collector is located alongside the prostitutes, robbers, evildoers, adulterers, pagans and gentiles while also being lumped together with sinners in general. There is little question that the Jewish community and especially the leadership, such as the Pharisees—the Jewish religious leaders— all had a bad taste in their mouths as the Roman world ruled over them. As a Jewish tax collector working for the Romans Zacchaeus was indeed between a rock and a hard place.

In many ways I can be empathetic to his plight while considering my role within the LGBTQ and Faith communities that also have a very strained relationship with one another. When I enter a LGBTQ space as a Christian I can frequently be looked at with deep suspicion. Conversely, entering a Christian setting as a LGBTQ person I am ever watchful for the many that may disdain me as an abomination. I might guess that some of you have also encountered a taste what Zacchaeus and I have experienced as you navigate between your family of origin and in- laws.

Having said all of that, what I’d like to focus on with you today is the matter of what inspired Zacchaeus to climb that tree? And just as importantly to respond to Jesus’ call in the way that he did. As you and I navigate our way through these questions I’d encourage each of us to consider the ways in which our journey’s might resemble that of Zacchaeus’.

The streets of Jericho were lined on both sides with curious onlookers gathered to see Jesus. They were there to see the Man that many were calling the Messiah. It had been a little more than three years since His

ministry had begun and word had spread rapidly throughout the land of Israel. Jesus was now on His final journey from the area known as Galilee to Jerusalem and passing through the town of Jericho. In total, it was a seventy-mile trek that would define the last six months of His earthly life. He was now a short fifteen miles outside the gates of Jerusalem. It was a slow slog towards His Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey and crucifixion atop Mount Calvary only weeks away.

I invite you to imagine with me the arrival of Jesus with the streets of Jericho lined with spectators. Zacchaeus, a man short in stature, jumping up and down to see over the heads of the people blocking his view, and preventing him from seeing Jesus. This was a rare moment for Zacchaeus, who was deeply despised and most certainly had few friends, to see this great man who was said to keep company with people like himself. Most certainly frustrated and wanting to get more than a momentary glance he decides to run ahead and to climb a sycamore-fig tree that stands adjacent to the path which Jesus is to walk. This image of the towns folks who despised Zacchaeus cordoning him off from seeing Jesus reminds me too of the ways in which LGBT folks have also been isolated from seeing Him. We too have been scorned and left to run ahead to a climb a tree.

Some have suggested the sycamore-fig is the same type of tree described in the Book of Genesis as the "Tree of Life". I believe that this assessment fits beautifully with the way that Zacchaeus relates to it. The sycamore-fig tree is commonly found in the plains of Israel and especially known for its regenerative nature while producing up to six crops of figs per year. It can grow to be quite large with a wide trunk and sparse foliage. The challenge in climbing such a tree probably shouldn't be underestimated and especially for a person described as being so short. And once in the tree, it would also be difficult to avoid being seen because of its thin vegetation.

While reading this passage from Luke I also found myself wondering if Zacchaeus wanted more than simply to see Jesus. I believe, perhaps, that Zacchaeus did not want just to see Him but also to be seen. I think that this is an especially important idea that bears repeating. Zacchaeus not only wanted to clearly witness Jesus for himself but also wanted to make himself known to the Messiah. In effect to be found. To do so he couldn't just stand among all the other citizens of Jericho that lined the streets that day. Jesus certainly wouldn't notice him standing in or among the spectators. No, he had been ostracized and set apart from his Jewish community since becoming a tax collector and standing there next to those who so despised him would be unbearable. And so, in a twist of irony, Zacchaeus in all his wealth, would mount a tree that produces fruit that only the poor would eat. Propped by a branch, he stood out and above those that would declare him a sinner.

After reading the story of Zacchaeus I began imagining an image of him as Ebenezer Scrooge from the ever-popular Christmas Carol story by Charles Dickens. You might recall that Ebenezer was certainly not well liked. Instead of collecting taxes, Mr. Scrooge was a banker who lent money at outlandish rates that played against the misfortunes of many in the town. He too was despised by nearly everyone around him and refused to donate to the poor. In the end Ebenezer, however, repents after being visited by the ghosts of the past, present, and future. Responding in a way very similar to Zacchaeus, Ebenezer runs excitedly to the home of, Bob Cratchit, one of his downtrodden employees, to give him money necessary to save the life of his dying son, Tiny Tim. It would seem clear that Mr. Scrooge was a lost soul until that dreamy night when

three ghosts visited him. Zacchaeus too was lost but redeemed after giving half his wealth to the poor and inviting Jesus into his home. And so, Jesus proclaimed “Today salvation has come...”

Something very profound and life altering happened to Zacchaeus and Scrooge. It changed them at the very core of their being. Zacchaeus, for example, heard the call from Jesus and followed it without hesitation. We are told that “...he came down at once and welcomed him [Jesus] gladly.” It would seem that he was thrilled not just to be seen but to also be invited into connection with Jesus. He responded not out of some apparent obligation but out of a great joy as demonstrated by his free giving of half of his possessions to the poor and an agreement of restitution for those that he might have cheated. Where Zacchaeus was controlled by greed, he was now controlled by love. Through this process of restoring harmony, we find Zacchaeus atoning for his sins. You might note that atonement goes beyond saying that we’re sorry for some injustice we may have committed. It also includes some type of sacrifice that promotes reconciliation.

The things that Zacchaeus and Scrooge once cherished, or dare I say fettered over, and which defined them were no longer important. So much so that they were able to give those things away joyfully as they were powerless over what had instead been found. For both Scrooge and Zacchaeus money was that thing but I believe that it can be many other things. I can certainly say from my own experience that it was much more about letting go of being what others around me needed or expected me to be. Over time I nearly lost myself while living vicariously through those in my life. The idea of exploring or revealing my identity was terrifying if not unimaginable. In the end, and in the darkest of moments it was the Holy Spirit that arose within me and delivered salvation through my faith in Christ Jesus.

Many of us, including myself and Zacchaeus have found ourselves tightly clinging to an addictive or unhealthy relationship with something or someone in an attempt to calm our deepest fears and seek safety from them. But there comes a time when we realize that the safety we thought we had constructed was an illusion and find ourselves lost as both Zacchaeus and I had. I invite us to take a moment here to deeply consider those things, and yes there can be several, that we have allowed ourselves to be distracted by while losing sight of the one true beacon in our life. Think about the ways in which you relate to people and things in contrast to your relationship with God. Do any get in the way or interfere such that He is lesser in your life?

In a United Methodist Church frame of reference, Zacchaeus was most likely drawn to climb that sycamore-fig tree and to see Jesus because of something called “pre-venient grace.” It is a special form of grace that comes before any awareness of God in our life, thus the “pre” part in the word. God’s grace stirs up within us a desire to know God and empowers us to respond to God’s invitation to be in relationship with Him. We might think of it as a safety net that God gave each of us including Zacchaeus who came to meet Jesus that day. It is probably what initially drew many of us into our first church. Wesley described prevenient grace as the porch on a house, a place where we are sheltered just outside the front door.

Zacchaeus climbed that sycamore-fig tree knowing that something was missing in his life, and suspecting that this man, Jesus, who was passing through Jericho, might have the answer. When Zacchaeus heard Jesus telling him to come down out of the tree He referred to him directly by name. Jesus knew him personally without the benefit of some previous introduction. He didn’t yell up into that tree “hey you, short guy, come down from that tree, I need to talk to you.” When Jesus prophetically called out to Zacchaeus by name He

was in effect saying that I know everything that you know about yourself and even those things that you may not know yet. I know and have experienced your pain and your longings, have faith in Me and grace is given for your salvation.¹¹

The text tells us through the whispers of the crowd that Zacchaeus was a sinner. A fact that he didn't seem to deny but to the contrary tacitly affirmed through his offers of reconciliation, to right the wrongs he had done. Zacchaeus had lost sight of his relationship with God through his primary pursuit of wealth. So too might we easily fall victim to any number of wayward relationships that steer us away from our one true beacon. We might reflect together on the ways in which not just materialism, guilt, shame, grudges, and jealousy but also things such as achievements or accomplishments or even aspirations can distract us from our connection with God. All those things can serve to get us all tangled up, they bind us and hold us and eventually drags us down to destruction.

Like Zacchaeus, many of us have most certainly messed up and will continue to mess up in our own unique ways. That's OK, and even to be expected as it's part of our human experience.

Jesus went to the cross for the forgiveness of all our sins, for all the ways that we will mess up or come up short. His sacrifice, however, is not a "get out of jail free card" as atonement that we talked about earlier requires that we act in a way to restore what was. The temptation to ignore or discount that process would lead to what the theologian, Bonhoeffer, appropriately defined as "cheap grace." In the case of Zacchaeus, it would mean that he could come down from the tree to meet with Jesus but have no need or responsibility to "give half his possessions to the poor," or compensate those that he may have cheated. Indeed, Jesus demanded that He stay in the home of Zacchaeus in order to express His complete and unwavering love for him. A love that stood above and beyond the crowds that offered nothing but contempt. Our salvation like that of Zacchaeus' is made possible through the power of God's grace and freedom from the power of sin.

When Jesus told Zacchaeus that He must stay in his house that night Zacchaeus experienced a call to be in connection with Jesus. He recognized that something was not right, that something was perhaps missing or incomplete in his life and suspected that Jesus, the Messiah, who was passing through Jericho that day held the answer to his longing. And so that tree, known by some as the "Tree of Life" yielded more good fruit that day and it too was in support of the poor and oppressed.

Jesus taught us that grace can be found through faith and repentance. And it is through the act of atonement of Christ¹² that Zacchaeus was able to respond to God's 'justifying grace'—a form of grace available to those who have welcomed God into their life. When Jesus commanded Zacchaeus out of the tree He also added that He needed to stay at his house. Without hesitation, Zacchaeus happily welcomed Jesus into his home, and in effect into his life. Think back to Wesley's image of prevenient grace as the porch and justifying grace as the front door into God's home. Christ Jesus opened the door and invited Zacchaeus in as He called him by his name.

It is the power and process of atonement that forgives each of us for our sins, whether from the greed that Zacchaeus was guilty of or the flaws that you or I struggle with. Zacchaeus had been lost but now he was found. He had been in sin but now he has been saved. It is as simple as that. Jesus is waiting for us to welcome Him into our home and life. He puts no restrictions or stipulations on it. What we must also realize is

that Jesus is seeking us out because He loves us! He wants to initiate a relationship with us or make our current relationship even more intimate.

With the insights we gained through the story of Zacchaeus we might also ask who among us, both in our congregation and outside, are those who have been left on the margin, who have been ruled out of bounds, who might surprise us by their generosity and faith, and who just want to see Jesus but have been kept at bay. If we are willing to ask—and dare answer—such questions, we might see both Zacchaeus, our self, and Jesus in a whole new light.

1 Ephesians 2:8.

2 Atonement: ‘at-one-ment’ that is recognized responsibility for an injustice and willingness to not only acknowledge it, but to restore harmony by working towards reconciliation.

Benediction

May the Lord bless you and be gracious to you.

May the Lord give you the grace never to sell yourself or God short

The grace to risk something big for something good,

The grace to know that the world is too dangerous for anything but the truth and too small for anything but love.³

May God take your mind and think through it

May God take your lips and speak through them

May God take your hands and do something good with them.

And may God take your heart and set it on fire!

...and so, as we leave today, on this New Year’s Eve going into the future

as yet unmapped

take faith with you as you go;

into the parts of your life not yet traveled by love into the parts of the world unexplored by grace

let compassion and hope be the roads that you follow today and always

Amen

3 William Sloan Coffin