

Sermon – October 30, 2022

“When Jesus Calls, How Will You Respond?”

Text: Luke 19:1-10

Prayer:

God of new beginnings, call us wherever we are in your holy presence as we listen and reflect on your Word today. Whether we climb trees or meet you on the ground, may we respond to your call with a welcoming heart and an open mind. Amen.

Our gospel story today brings us back to our good old days at Sunday School. I'm sure most of you know by heart that Sunday School song about “a wee little man who climbed a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.” Let's see who among you here remembers that song. Let's sing it altogether:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man
And a wee little man was he
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see
And when the Saviour passed that way
He looked up in the tree
And said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down!
For I'm going to your house for tea!
For I'm going to your house for tea!'

I grew up in a culture that was saturated with all sorts of prejudice and stereotypes about people and places. Many of them were about physical features. If your skin is black, your nose is flat and your hair curly, you are called a Negro. If you live in the highlands, you are called an Igorot, similar to an indigenous person. If you wear eyeglasses, you are labelled as four eyes or a nerd. If you are short, they call you a dwarf. If you are tall and lanky, they call you a bamboo.

I'm sure it was the same in Jesus' days. Samaritans were unclean. Jews were God's chosen ones. Gentiles were called dogs. The Romans were oppressors. Arabs were tricksters. The Pharisees were righteous. Tax collectors were crooks. Women were chattels. Children were a nuisance.

That wee little man, Zacchaeus, was not exempt from prejudices and labelling. If he had known Simon and Garfunkel, he could be singing the first line of Bridge Over Troubled Water as his theme song: “when you're weary, feeling small...” Zacchaeus knew what it was to be weary and also what it was to feel small. If I asked you how you would describe Zacchaeus, these

words might come up: short, rich, corrupt, greedy, anti-social, despicable, ugly, unwanted, desperate. Peter Woods calls him a “lurker” – like those who enter the chat room but never join or participate in the discussion. But did you know that his name surprisingly means “clean” or innocent or righteous? Ironically, he was introduced to us as “sinful”, a crook, a cheater, and “unclean”. Poor Zacchaeus – can we come up with more positive descriptions of him?

Although very wealthy, Zacchaeus was "cast out" or isolated because he collected taxes for a repressive regime. The chief tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, were known for colluding with Rome and for taking advantage of those who were poor and vulnerable so they could have pockets full of wealth. So when shorty Zacchaeus is coming up the street, people tend to shy away from him – not even look his way. I bet you, he is one of those not be invited to social dinners or even holding memberships in social clubs. Being short means more than not being able to see what everyone else can see over the heads of the crowd. It means not being elected class president, or not being drafted into any of those sports like basketball that claim “height is might”. Being short makes it harder not only to reach things on high shelves, but also harder to be seen, to be heard, to be included. We can assume that few people get close enough to him to know whether he has any soul or depth of care at all. Nobody notices whether there is any longing in him for love or companionship or attention. After all, he has everything he could want: a big house, lots of money, a job with security. He's probably just a rich spoiled brat. Soon Zacchaeus' spiritual longing will be out in the open. Because of his experience of isolation and indifference from others, he is encouraged by simply knowing that Jesus is coming to town. He'll take the risk, even though there must be something in him that says, “I am not worthy speaking to this man, Jesus!” The story says, he climbs a tree. Not just any other tree. He climbs a sycamore tree, a variation of a fig tree, a thick-barked, prickly, shady tall tree that no one dares to climb. No one is beyond the need for a life-changing experience than the desperate Zacchaeus himself. In his desperation, the only way for Zacchaeus is to climb the sycamore tree so he can see Jesus.

Who was in the crowd with Jesus that day? The disciples, certainly, and all kinds of people who have heard of Jesus and want something from him—the sick, the lame, the poor and the marginalized, curiosity seekers, onlookers and perhaps some of the religious and political leaders who detested Jesus. It is a chaotic, emotional scene in the streets of Jericho. Jesus looks up into

the sycamore tree and sees someone the others have missed and completely ignored. He sees the longing in Zacchaeus. Who is this man who attempted to make himself known and vulnerable up in a tree? Rev. Anna Carter Florence claims that it was out of sheer desperation that Zacchaeus climbed a tree. And sometimes we need to improvise – we need to do whatever we can, to be noticed, to be heard, to be recognized- yes, even climb trees to do that. And when Jesus was passing through that day, he couldn't help but tilt his head upwards and saw Zacchaeus. And when Jesus did that, the whole crowd was forced to look upwards and saw Zacchaeus – the man they had ignored, the man they had outcasted and labelled as a crook, for the very first time.

"Come down! Zacchaeus. I'm coming over to your house today!" Jesus knows Zacchaeus! Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' house! In the Jewish tradition, the ultimate act of hospitality is to take someone into your house, your home, your sanctuary. Jesus says—"Come down, Zacchaeus. I want your hospitality now. You have something to give that is good and worthwhile." In Luke's Gospel, no one stands outside of the need for a life-changing grace. Everyone is included in the same status: those labeled as the rich and the poor, those who are in the circle of God's grace and those isolated, those that are found and those who are lost, those who are food-hungry and those who hunger for God. All are welcome at the table. All are included in God's grace.

Many preachers interpreted this invitation from Jesus as an invitation to salvation. The need for salvation comes in different shapes and packages. When we are sick, grieving, lonely or separated from our loved ones, we need salvation. When we are hungry for food or for peace, we need salvation. When we are in peril or in danger, brought about by wars, natural calamities or accidents, we need salvation. When we are in a political upheaval or in a national or economic crisis, we need salvation. When we are lost and alienated from God because of our sins and moral depravity, we need salvation. Because of his work as the chief tax collector, the people assumed Zacchaeus was a crook, unclean, unworthy, a sinner! Jesus was the only one who saw Zacchaeus' heart. The labeled man, Zacchaeus, needs salvation, so he can be in the right relationships with others, because that is the only way he can be at peace with himself and with others. In his turning around, in his full conversion and repentance, Zacchaeus declares: "Look, half of my possession, Lord, I will give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four

times as much.” And Jesus, knowing the genuine honesty in Zacchaeus’ voice, responds: “Today, salvation has come to this house!”

The story of Zacchaeus reminds us of the wideness of God's mercy and encourages us to keep our hearts tender and open to voices of vulnerability and openness. I wonder how many Zacchaeuses are here today? Are you weary and feeling small and in need of healing and wholeness? Are you feeling shame and have been looked down on because of your physical and mental state, your social status, your gender, your work? There is good news for you. Jesus is drawn to shame and sadness and he won't hesitate to welcome you to God's grace.

How do we as a faithful community open our doors and our hearts to the Zacchaeuses in the world? The saving grace we receive from God is the mirror image of the grace we should extend to others. Have you been forgiven? Then forgive. Have you received love? Then offer love in return. Have you been prayed for? Then pray for others as well. Friends, this is not merely a story for Zacchaeus. It is also our story.

Jesus says to us all, as he said to Zacchaeus, "Come down from whatever tree you have climbed! I am coming to your house today because you, too, are God's beloved. By your decision to honestly repent and change your heart and your ways, you are transformed and saved. You are made new. Come and find joy! Come and enjoy God's grace from now on. Welcome back, Zacchaeus, son of Abraham. Amen.

Sources:

BCUC Lectionary Group, Peter Wood, “Camouflaged by Shame”, thelisteninghermit.com, Anna Carter Florence, Festival of Homiletics, 2019.