

Sermon October 30, 2016
"Believing in Zacchaeus"

Tax Collectors, not to mention chief tax collectors, were considered a special class of sinners by the Jews. They were fellow Judeans who were working for the Roman occupiers. They not only got rich by impoverishing others, but they were known to send troops to invade homes of those who allegedly were withholding unreported goods. Presumably Zacchaeus and his cronies invaded the homes of common people and plundered them with the full power of the Roman insignia behind them. The more goods they could tax, the richer they would become. The more they could use their knowledge of their own people, intimate knowledge, betraying knowledge, the richer they would become. That was the carrot that was hung by the Romans in front of Zacchaeus, and, with the help of several others, he had reached it. He "was rich," Luke says.

We don't know if Luke's telling us of his short stature was in reference to his physical height or his esteem. As wealthy as he might have become, every coin he earned was a mark of his collusion with unholy violent powers that choked their society at every weak point. Every coin, every servant, every fine garment, every room of his manor, was a sign of his evil, taking advantage of an ever growing crowd of people. Every luxury was a sign that some household had lost, and he, with Rome, had won. The people of Jericho would have hated this man. A significant portion would have dreamed of raiding his home in the night to end his reign of fiscal terror and to end his life. But the risk of reprisal was too great. And so the stand-off between the broken masses and the ascendant few continued, with Zacchaeus and his kind the object of sneers, rather than of pitchforks.

Zacchaeus was no slouch, though. And on this day, the day of a famous healing rabbi's visit, he figured out a way to get box seats to the event, using the power of forecasting. He figured out the likely path of Jesus' route through the city, a kind of roving parade, a jostling crowd of people yearning for a word, or a look, or a healing grace. I imagine it was pivotal that Jesus had 12 young men to keep those people from crushing him, especially in a big city like Jericho. Zacchaeus predicted the path of Jesus and the crowds and then took it upon himself to climb a tree, so that he could see the rabbi himself, his own view above the fray, a fray that might have "accidentally" trampled him, if the opportunity presented itself.

What did Zacchaeus want? He climbed the tree, one of the most hated of his people, to see someone who, at least for now, was one of the most beloved of his people. Did he think that Jesus had something to offer him? The crowd would have thought otherwise. Zacchaeus, was God's enemy, not God's friend. He was dead to rights, dead to blessings, lost. But Zacchaeus climbed the tree, using all his cleverness, hauling his body limb by limb to catch a glimpse of something good. In the act of climbing that tree, he exposed part of his soul, part of his heart that wasn't dead. Perhaps that part was kindled when he heard one of Jesus' parables through the grapevine. An unbelievable story of a penitent tax collector who asked for God's mercy and actually received it, when a Pharisee, the brightest and best, came away empty. How is that even possible? Who would say such a thing? What rabbi would risk his holy reputation by sticking up for the unholy? Was Zacchaeus a lost cause? Or could he be salvaged.

His climbing that tree was a demonstration that that was the case, for those who could see it. Others would have seen a bad apple hanging there, rotten to the core, filled with worms that never die. But when Jesus' train came by that tree, Jesus saw living fruit waiting to be plucked, waiting to be disentangled from a thorny vine, yearning to be grafted to the True Vine that God has planted by living water and tends with a merciful hand. Jesus saw what no one else could dare to consider, that there were seeds of the kingdom of heaven in Zacchaeus' heart yearning to be sown.

So Jesus plucked Zacchaeus from that tree. In the sight of all, he refused to look down on Zacchaeus in judgement, but he looked up to him in mercy, saying to him, "Get outta that tree, Zacchaeus. We're eating at your place tonight!" A scandal! For Jesus could have eaten in practically anyone's home in Jericho that night. And he chooses the scum of the earth, so to speak, to eat at his table. But, look what happened! Zacchaeus said yes to Jesus! He came down from the tree. He responded to Jesus' call. He laid out a table for him. He listened to his stories. They ate and drank together. He gathered his entire household around him and proclaimed something that no one would have ever expected. He would be giving half of his wealth away to the poor of Jericho. And that he would be returning the money that he defrauded from others, four-fold! Unbelievable! One encounter, one meal, changes Zacchaeus' life forever, setting it on a bold, new course. One of generosity and justice, trying to set right what once went wrong, in truth-telling

and making his life into a recompense and a gift .His life was forever changed for the better. All the lives he had wounded and ruined in the city of Jericho, Zacchaeus began to attend to that, too. I can't imagine that Zacchaeus would have made it into the Gospel if he did not end up honoring these promises. He was a great surprise, as if one of Jesus' parables had come to life, making the jump from divine fantasy to brute reality, living on earth as dreamed in heaven.

Zacchaeus is a double-edged example for us in our time. Jesus called his disciples away from their old life to a new one, from an old career to a new career, as he said to James and John, you like fishing so much, why not fish for people? In Zacchaeus, we find one who responds to the call of Jesus and changes the very nature of his career, a livelihood that took away the livelihood of others, a way of life that was a kind of legal theft. Sadly, there are so many livelihoods out there that end up doing more harm than good. Perhaps it wasn't initially apparent. Perhaps it was patently obvious. No matter how it begins, we, like Zacchaeus can find ourselves ensconced in institutions that orchestrate our benefiting, our thriving, through theft or deception or extortion, both the illegal and legal varieties.

Even if you have the kind of moral and spiritual epiphany that Zacchaeus had, it is no simple matter to extricate yourself and your household from these thorny vines of the world, especially for those with families and other commitments. It could be a single conversation, or it could take months or even years. Whatever the path, Jesus sees us and calls us to take that first step out of the quagmires of our lives. Jesus has hope for us. The most important thing, actually, is not believing in Jesus, but knowing that Jesus believes in you. No matter what. There are no lost causes, only increasingly spectacular salvage opportunities.

But there is the other side to the example of Zacchaeus: the truth that even if no one believed it was possible, it still was possible. That the light of God could be waiting to burst out of those that all considered the darkest of spirits. And yet, if it wasn't for Jesus' coming, I doubt that even Zacchaeus would have been able to break out of the hypnotic groupthink that was his low stature. Would he have been able to break out of his reputation? Without Jesus, without Jesus' bona fides and blessing, would the grumbling crowd, would the city have let him rise above his low stature? I doubt it. Without some sort of outside intervention, and graceful intervention at that, I fear Zacchaeus would have remained in his gilded cage.

And so, we have to ask ourselves, are we willing to join Jesus in believing in Zacchaeus? Are we able to get beyond our resentment of the notorious people of this world, this city, and in our lives? So many institutions are very interested in stoking these resentments, and they make a lot of money from you in this, so the deck is stacked against you. But in places like this, are we able to quench our burning resentments and fathom that the most unsuitable and scorned among us are poised to become an even more spectacular part of God's story, perhaps even more than the steady and regular faithful? And are we able to remember that our resentful righteousness has no place in this holy hope. As Jesus said, "The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost." Are we on board with this? Or are we too good for that? Are we too good to open ourselves to God's greatness? To God's grace in those we deplore? Can we only take God on our terms? Are we too good for God?