***A WEE LITTLE MAN NAMED ZACCHAEUS***

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Texts: Luke 19:1-10 and Habakkuk 2:1-4

A few weeks ago one of our lay speakers mentioned that she had to google Zacchaeus to find out who he was – and maybe you would as well! Zacchaeus is not one of those names that pop up near the top of the list of favorite names for newborn boys; it is down there with Jehoshaphat and Ziza, though that could change any day now. Within the pages of Scripture there is only one Zacchaeus, the man we heard about in the reading from Luke’s Gospel this morning. If you ask those who know his name, including many of our children, the first thing they might tell you is this: *Zacchaeus was a wee, little man and a wee little man was he*. Goliath is known for being huge, Samson for being strong, Solomon for being wise, Adam and Eve for being naked, Judas for being a traitor, and Zacchaeus for being short, so small that he could not see over the crowds lining the Jericho street as Jesus drew near to the city.

Let me confess that I have a hard time relating to that problem of altitudinal challenge, but some of you know just how Zacchaeus felt there at the side of the road amid the crowd. Some years ago Karen and I were in Paris on Bastille Day which is celebrated with a huge military parade on the 70 meter wide Avenue des Champs Elysees; crowds eight and ten people deep gathered along the avenue to watch the variety of military vehicles, soldiers, and even helicopters pass by as music blared from speakers along the road. Since we had not arrived at the crack of dawn, we were well back from the street, but I was able to see most of the parade over the heads of those in front of me. My nieces too saw the parade from their perch on top of my shoulders, taking turns climbing up there which made a long parade even longer! But my wife, all 5 feet 3 inches of her, **heard** more than she **saw** of the parade that day. Most of what she saw was the backs of the people in front of her, for the space on my shoulders was already taken, and there was no sycamore tree readily available!

That was the problem for Zacchaeus – he was too short to see over the crowd – and for whatever reason, he was determined to catch sight of Jesus. The text says, “He was trying to see who Jesus was,” but it offers no insight as to why Zacchaeus wanted to see him. Was it simple curiosity or the first stirrings of faith or was it something more? Luke does not say, though perhaps it is noteworthy that the text does not say, “He was trying to see Jesus.” It says, “He was trying to see *who Jesus was*.” And while we don’t know what he expected to see when he ran ahead of the crowd and climbed that sycamore tree, we do know that he was determined to see him and ended up seeing much more of who Jesus was than he expected!

Is there any person, any principle, any cause, any belief for which you are willing to throw caution to the wind and do something out of your comfort zone, like climb a tree? Is there anyone or anything that inspires such passion in you? I am not speaking here of bungee jumping or skydiving or alligator wrestling or any other adrenaline-stoked activity in which the thrill is the primary motivation. I am just wondering whether there is a belief or a cause or a person that so touches your heart that you are willing to go out on a limb – figuratively or literally – for him or her or it.

Zacchaeus would have been the last one that any of those gathered along the road would have expected to do such a thing. It had nothing to do with his diminutive stature and everything to do with is diminutive status in the community. He was a tax collector, hated by his fellow Jews. As Frederick Buechner describes him without mincing any words: *He’s a sawed-off little social disaster with a big bank account and a crooked job*.[[1]](#endnote-1) He is the lowest of the low, and the least of the least in Jewish society. He is the least respected and the least liked. He has sold his soul to the Roman government for the right to collect taxes from his fellow Jews in Jericho. He collects what is owed to Rome plus an additional sum for himself; that surcharge has made him filthy rich. He has personally profited from his political position. He is a corrupt cog in a corrupt system that has paid him handsome financial dividends at the expense of his neighbors and has alienated him from them. Why would he want to see Jesus?

Within the pages of Scripture there are a host of folks who go to great lengths to see Jesus. A couple of men cut a hole in the roof and lower their crippled friend to Jesus’ side in order that he might heal him. A woman with an unceasing flow of blood battles a crowd just to touch the hem of Jesus’ robe in hope that he might bring an end to her misery. A father leaves the side of his dying daughter to go to Jesus in the desperate hope that he might save her. All of those folks were desperate to see Jesus in order to find healing. Like them, many of us have turned to Jesus with desperate prayers in times of distress or after a dire diagnosis. But most of the time, we take him for granted. Like Zacchaeus, we are content to view him from afar – from the safety of a pew or a sycamore tree – to see him but not meet him, to speculate about who he is rather than embrace him, to know *about* him rather than know him – until we desperately need him.

Zacchaeus didn’t desperately need to go to Jesus for healing or to ask a deep question or to save a dying daughter. He only wanted to see who he was from a distance, from the roadside, from his safe perch in the tree. He had no plan to speak to Jesus or to meet him; he did so only because Jesus took the initiative. Jesus discerned his need, a need which even Zacchaeus did not recognize, a need for change, a need for salvation, a need for a new way of life, and so Jesus called to him as he sat in the tree, called him by name: **Zacchaeus!** That name was anathema to the crowd, but it was spoken by Jesus as one who knew him, embraced him as he was, loved him despite who he was, and so called him by name: **Zacchaeus!**

Again and again in Scripture it is a spoken name that marks a radical change. Moses turns aside to see a burning bush and hears God call his name: ***Moses!*** And so begins his call to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt. Mary is weeping outside the tomb and does not recognize the risen Jesus until he speaks her name: ***Mary!*** Then her eyes are opened, she recognizes him, and her tears of sorrow become tears of joy. Saul is traveling the Damascus Road in pursuit of more Christians to persecute until he is struck by a blinding light and hears his name: ***Saul, Saul****, why do you persecute me!* And thus begins his conversion to the apostle Paul, ambassador for the risen Christ. God knows our names, knows us better than we know ourselves and dares to take the initiative with us, to come to us in order to save us and to call us to be disciples even when we have showed little inclination or potential to be faithful or useful in God’s service. “*It is while we were still sinners that Christ died for us*,” writes Paul. It is God’s initiative of grace at work in our lives – sometimes subtly, sometimes stunningly – encouraging us to accept the invitation to a new way of life that is grounded in him even as we are mired in our old way of life.

God knows us as we are, yet still loves us, calls us, saves us to a new way of life in the hope that we might respond with transformed lives. As Frederick Buechner finishes that quote I offered earlier: “*Zacchaeus is a sawed-off little social disaster with a big bank account and a crooked job, but Jesus welcomes him aboard anyway.*” Jesus stops anyway. Jesus calls Zacchaeus out of the tree anyway with the brash declaration that he must stay at Zacchaeus’ house that day. Zacchaeus then had two options: he could climb down from the tree and accept the invitation, or he could stay where he was and respond, “That’s okay. I’m good here in the tree.”

Soren Kierkegaard calls it the *leap of faith* – that faithful response, that step from knowing about Jesus to knowing him, that step beyond thinking something could be true to trusting it to be true. In that image you have heard me use many times across the years, faith is not just believing that someone can push a wheelbarrow across a tightrope stretched across the Grand Canyon; it is getting in the wheelbarrow! For Zacchaeus it was a literal leap out of the tree to the ground at Jesus’ invitation, or perhaps more accurately, at his insistence, a leap of faith to go with Jesus and to transform his life by giving half his possessions to the poor and returning to those he had defrauded four times as much as he owed them. The leap of faith from that sycamore tree was just the start for Zacchaeus; the real response, came in those changes in his life, changes that moved him from selfish to generous, from unrighteous to righteous, prompting Jesus to say, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

“*The righteous live by faith*,” says the prophet Habakkuk. To be righteous is to be in right relationship with God. It is not enough to say, “I believe in God”, or “I believe in Jesus.” To be righteous is to **live** as God calls us to live, to **forgive** as God calls us to forgive, to **share** as God calls us to share, to **sacrifice** as God calls us to sacrifice, to **serve** as God calls us to serve, to **love** as God calls us to love, to **trust** God as God calls us to trust – with our heart, soul, mind, time, talents, and treasures all. It calls us out of our sycamore pews, calls us to change our selfish ways and follow where Jesus leads us – back home to a new way of life, a new way of living, a new way of giving of ourselves so that we too may hear those blessed words, *Today salvation has come to this house!* So may it be for your house, and for you. Amen

1. Frederick Buechner*, Peculiar Treasures: A Biblical Who’s Who*, Harper & Row:1979, p.180 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)