

Wesley United Methodist Church Rev. Beverly E Stenmark
November 10, 2019
Title: Climbing a Tree
Scripture: 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12
Luke 19:1-10

One of the things I love about Luke's gospel is that he tells stories that don't appear in any of the other gospels and most of them are great stories. These are stories like The Good Samaritan, The Lost Sheep, and The Prodigal Son. Luke is the only one who tells about the 10 lepers who were healed and only one – a Gentile – returning to thank Jesus. Luke talks about women more than the other gospels.

The most familiar and loved Christmas and Easter stories are in Luke's gospel. Jesus' birth is told from the perspectives of Elizabeth and Mary. The shepherds who were smelly and considered very low class appear only in Luke. The Risen Christ appears to a woman and he is the one who talks about women financially supporting Jesus' ministry.

Luke gives special emphasis to those who are poor, crippled, and on the outside. In seminary, we used to say that Luke's gospel was about "The Lost, The Last, and The Least".

One of the stories unique to Luke is the one we just heard about the tax collector Zacchaeus who climbed up a tree so that he could see Jesus. Zacchaeus was definitely an outsider in the Jewish community. The Roman government offered contracts to people to collect taxes. They were required to give a certain amount to Rome and whatever they collected above that was for them to keep. Zacchaeus is identified as a "chief tax collector" so he was likely one of those who had other tax collectors working for him. He is described as rich so he and those who worked for

him must have collected much more than they were required to pay to Rome.

Tax collectors were generally known for their corrupt practices and hated for their relationship with the oppressive Roman empire. In Jewish culture, they were often considered traitors who became wealthy by collaborating with the Roman authorities at the expense of their own people.

Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus and wanted to see him. But despite his wealth, people were not about to make room for him to see Jesus through the crowd. There was more than idle curiosity operating in Zacchaeus' mind and heart that day. Luke tells us that he "ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree". Men in 1st century Palestine did not run – nor did they climb trees. But like the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son who ran to greet his son, Zacchaeus ran down the road and climbed a tree so that he could see Jesus.

What happened next was well beyond anything Zacchaeus could have imagined. Even though there was a crowd gathered around him, Jesus not only saw Zacchaeus up in the tree, but stopped and spoke directly to him. Jesus called him by name. Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' home. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

The crowd became upset that Jesus was going to the home of one who was a sinner. Eating together was important in Jewish culture and in Luke's gospel there are a lot of examples of Jesus eating with people. Jesus uses these opportunities to teach people something important about who he is and what his teaching is about.

The table where Jesus ate was always open. It always seemed to include people who were outsiders, or outcasts. Social conventions were violated, and people were welcomed into the kingdom of God.

Can you imagine for a minute what it must have felt like for Zacchaeus to have Jesus speak directly to him? He had been the object of both religious and social judgement. He likely lived a pretty isolated life despite his wealth and suddenly Jesus was speaking directly to him, calling him by name, and inviting himself to Zacchaeus' home. The joy and surprise that Zacchaeus must have felt would have been overwhelming. Jesus did not condemn him. Jesus did not issue judgment. He did not lecture Zacchaeus on taking unfair advantage of his neighbors; instead he gave Zacchaeus the opportunity to practice hospitality.

Jesus saw something in Zacchaeus that probably no one else had ever seen. Jesus saw beyond Zacchaeus, the tax collector, and saw a man who was more than what he appeared to be from the outside. To others, Zacchaeus was a traitor, a cheat, a man who forced them to pay more in taxes than they could afford and who profited from their difficulties. Jesus saw something different.

Jesus saw the possibility of who Zacchaeus could be. I've heard speculation that because Zacchaeus was short, he might have been bullied as a child and being a tax collector was his way of getting back at those who had made his childhood miserable. I don't know if that is true or not, but Jesus knew who Zacchaeus was and knew his story. He saw not just who Zacchaeus was at that point, but he also saw who Zacchaeus was in the very core of his being and he gave him the opportunity to be what Jesus knew he could be.

When I was in seminary, I remember a professor telling us about the title of a sermon that he had always remembered. I don't remember which professor told us about it, but clearly the title spoke to me since I remember the gist of it after all these years. The sermon title was "Jesus accepts you where he finds you but doesn't leave you where you are." That's what Jesus did with Zacchaeus and that's what Jesus does with each of us.

No matter who we think we are, or who others think we are, Jesus knows who we are, looks at us and sees a beloved and special child of God. Jesus sees the possibilities within us and accepts and welcomes us just as he finds us. But that's only the beginning. Jesus then invites us to grow, to become all that we can be with Jesus by our side.

If you are feeling like Zacchaeus – rejected, judged, outside, somehow less than someone else – know that today, and each day, Jesus stops and looks directly at you. Jesus sees you through eyes of love and calls you by name. Jesus loves you just as you are and at the same time, Jesus sees the possibilities within you. Jesus knows who you can become and promises to be with you each step of the journey.

Or maybe there was a time in your life when you felt like Zacchaeus. Do you remember when Jesus saw you and called you by name? Maybe he used the eyes of another person to see you; someone who helped you feel seen, someone who recognized something special about you, someone who helped you feel loved. Can you look back and see how Jesus found you and accepted you just as you were, and then began to help you grow into the person you are today? Do you see Jesus still working in your life; still inviting and encouraging you to grow deeper in your relationship with him?

There is another important thing for us to see in this encounter with Jesus. A friend of mine was preparing to preach on this passage last week and in our conversation, he made some important points. David is a tall white male and he observed that in most cases, he would be able to see over the crowd and would not need to climb a tree in order to see Jesus. He pointed out that his height gave him a privilege that someone described as being short like Zacchaeus would not have. Most of us live with some form of privilege. David asked what we do with our privilege.¹

We may not often recognize our privilege – in fact it is because we have privileges that we may not see them or be aware of them. If our skin is white, we have the privilege of being able to walk into most stores or walk down most streets and not have someone wonder what we are up to simply because of the color of our skin. Most men have not had the experience of being sexually harassed by someone at work or in an organization. If we have a steady source of income, we often have the privilege of not having to wonder if we will have food to eat tomorrow or if we will have to find a shelter to sleep in. If we have health insurance, we have the privilege of not having to panic when we get ill.

There is nothing wrong with having these privileges, and all of us have some forms of privilege in our lives. That is simply a reality. The challenge is to recognize the privileges that we do enjoy and to be aware that there are others who do not have those same privileges. So, what does this have to do with Zacchaeus? Two things, I think.

First – Zacchaeus, while being an outsider, also had privilege. He had money that was gained by being part of an oppressive system that took advantage of others. In those places where we are like the rich man

in the sycamore tree, it is important to recognize when we are benefitting from or part of systems that are unjust.

Zacchaeus pledged to give half of what he had to the poor and to repay 4 times anyone he had cheated. I want to believe that he also did whatever he could to help make the system of taxation a little less oppressive and unjust by being honest and fair in his work. That is a sign of God's kingdom breaking through on earth. Are there places where what we or the systems to which we belong can and should give back to those who have been cheated or deprived? Are there places where we can use our privilege to help make other systems more just and fair?

Secondly, it is good for us to ask ourselves how we treat those who we think are part of the "other." Who are the people we do not see? Who are the Zacchaeus' around us who have climbed a tree to see Jesus?

I have made some very general statements about what tax collectors were like in 1st century Palestine. But we need to be careful not to make blanket statements or assumptions about a person simply because he or she belongs to a specific group. We need to be careful when we put people in boxes, lump them together, and make assumptions because they are immigrants, Muslim, unemployed, Democrats, Republicans, Senior Citizens, Young Adults, young children, Yankee or Red Sox Fans or any other group.

Frequently, we learn about cultures or ideologies that are different than our own by engaging in conversation with people from that particular group. However, it is important to be aware that while an individual may be able to speak in general terms, what he or she says is not necessarily true for every person in that group.

Although Zacchaeus was a tax collector, Jesus did not address him as a member of that group. Jesus called Zacchaeus by name, recognizing Zacchaeus as an individual, a unique person who was valued by God. Jesus knows each person by name. One of the ways that we can continue to grow into the people God calls us to be, is to honestly look at our own lives and ask ourselves when we have acted out of our privilege and when we have treated others as part of a group rather than as a person who Jesus calls and loves by name. Since this is really hard to see in ourselves, we can ask others to help us, and ask God to help us be more aware of our actions and attitudes.

Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus invites us to remember that God knows our name and sees us as a beloved person. God knows our possibilities, loves us and accepts us as we are and invites us to grow and become all that God knows we can be. At the same time, God calls us to recognize the places in our lives where we experience privilege. God challenges us to pay attention to how we respond to that privilege and how we think about or treat those who do not have that same privilege. We can ask Jesus to use our eyes to really see the people who have climbed a tree to see Jesus, people who God knows by name.

¹ David Abbott, conversation with me.