

“Taking the Wee Little Man Seriously”  
Based on Luke 19: 1-10  
by Rev. Meghan Davis  
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This week a friend of mine posted on Facebook, “Now I'm thinking that I haven't taken Zacchaeus seriously enough. I like how he's willing to climb a tree and be a little ridiculous. And he's the last in a series of outcasts whom Jesus welcomes. Gotta love a good outcast.”<sup>1</sup> And I realized, I probably never really took Zacchaeus very seriously, either. Remember that song from childhood? Zacchaeus was a wee little man; a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see. And when the Lord did walk that way he looked up in the tree. And he said, “Zacchaeus, you come down from there. For I'm coming to your house for tea. Yes I'm coming to your house for tea.” With that song in mind, it's hard to take the wee little man seriously. But in this story some of the most important of Luke's themes appear: Jesus welcoming the outsiders, faith and repentance, the right use of wealth, God's salvation in the world. So probably, Zacchaeus is worthy of being taken seriously.

This story, incorporates an atypical use of detail. Often in stories like this, the people Jesus encounters aren't even given names—think of the blind man, the lepers, the bent over woman. The list of unnamed people Jesus encounters goes on and on. But in this encounter, Zacchaeus is named, and not only named but is described physically: a man “short in stature.” Now obviously, his height is pointed out because it is important to the plot of the story. But there's also a sense that his short height is a reflection of his lack of good character.

Though many of us may have some warm feelings toward the wee little man (thanks in large part to the children's song), it's safe to say, those in his community would not have. Again, tax collectors were considered sinners and traitors. They not only collected money from people for the Roman Empire—that is, the occupying power—but they did so by any means necessary, coercion, deception, whatever it took. And they were free to take as much from people as they wanted, then they'd turn over whatever was required to Rome and keep the rest. So it's not surprising that they weren't the most loved in any given community. But Zacchaeus wasn't just a tax collector, he was the *chief* tax collector. Meaning he was the richest of them all and benefitted the most from the ill-gotten gains of the tax collecting system. Think Bernie Madoff. Zacchaeus would have been as loathsome to the people of Jericho as Bernie Madoff is to us, but at least we have the satisfaction of knowing that Bernie Madoff was eventually caught, tried and is now being punished. Zacchaeus, however, wasn't breaking any secular laws and he was free to do as he pleased.

So one day, Zacchaeus hears that Jesus is coming to town and for some reason, he is eager to see Jesus. Of course, given his height, he knows that he's never going to be able to see Jesus if he's just in the crowd, so he runs ahead of the crowd, finds a sycamore tree and climbs it. So, despised and hated as Zacchaeus was, he was also a rich man and I would guess not a particularly young man. For him to run, much less climb a tree would have been

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<sup>1</sup> Scott Clark, October 21, 2010.

particularly unusual and undignified. But Zacchaeus risks that embarrassment because, for reasons probably even he could not explain, he yearns to see Jesus.

Undoubtedly, he hopes to get a good glimpse of the itinerant preacher as he passes by. He's probably hopeful that no one will see him or recognize him up in that tree. Not only does Jesus see him, but he calls out his name, bringing the attention of the whole assembly on his awkward position in that tree. How did Jesus know his name? It seems unlikely they had ever met before since Zacchaeus is so eager to see Jesus and doesn't just go up to him as an acquaintance would. Jesus is just as driven and compelled to be with Zacchaeus as Zacchaeus is to see him. God's grace compels Jesus to reach out to Zacchaeus just as God's grace compelled Zacchaeus to seek out Jesus. It seems the forces of grace can be very compelling.

When Jesus calls out to Zacchaeus, surely everyone there, including Zacchaeus, expected Jesus to really let him have it. Jesus has been preaching against the rich and for the poor all this time. His predecessor John the Baptist would have called him a viper, Jesus was known to say things like "woe to the rich." In that split second between Jesus calling out to Zacchaeus and his next sentence, the crowd was probably almost giddy with anticipation of Jesus telling Zacchaeus off. But instead, Jesus does something more than a little shocking. He invites himself to Zacchaeus's house. Inviting oneself to someone else's house, especially a stranger, was something that just was not done. As much of a social faux pas as it is now, it was even more so then. But Zacchaeus doesn't seem to mind at all. Somehow he gets out of the tree (I can imagine it wasn't particularly graceful) and joyfully welcomed Jesus into his home and into his life.

Interestingly, the crowd didn't seem surprised to see the rich, chief tax collector in a tree. They didn't seem surprised that Jesus knew his name or even really that Jesus invited himself to his house. What bothers the crowd is that Jesus would be a guest of a known sinner. What bothers the crowd is that Jesus would even associate with the man. For Pharisees, what happens at the table is extremely important. It's not just about what you eat but with whom you eat. A Pharisee would never share a meal with a known sinner, much less the chief known sinner. To do so would be to accept the sinner and the sinner's behavior. For Jesus to eat with Zacchaeus has the appearance that Jesus accepts and maybe even condones Zacchaeus's behavior. This isn't the first time Jesus has been the target of grumblings and complaints about the types of people with whom he chose to associate. Typically, when the complaints arose, he'd tell a parable, like the one we heard last week about the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the Temple. But in today's story, Jesus *enacts* the parable. Rather than telling a story about God's search and salvation for the lost, Jesus *shows* the critics how it's done.

And Zacchaeus's response to Jesus, after his initial, joyful welcome: he stood there. It's so static. After all the running and climbing up the tree and then climbing down out of the tree, now Zacchaeus simply stands before Jesus (and perhaps the critics). It seems Zacchaeus is so moved by the act of grace from Jesus that he cannot move. But he can talk and he promises to give away everything in essence. If he gives half to the poor and pays back four times what he has gotten through dishonest means, how can he have anything left?

Even if he does somehow have any money left, he will certainly take a severe reduction in lifestyle.

In just ten verses, Zacchaeus makes essentially the same transformation as Ebenezer Scrooge in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. He goes from ruthless, loathsome rich man to generosity personified. John Calvin wrote that in Zacchaeus's response, Zacchaeus was "changed from a wolf not only into a sheep, but into a shepherd."<sup>2</sup> I love a good transformation story and really enjoy transformational reality shows where people turn their lives around by getting a wardrobe makeover, losing weight, getting on the right financial path or cleaning excess junk out their house. But I always wonder if those transformed were able to stick with their new ways of life. I always wish they'd have a "where are they now" follow up on those shows. Likewise, I wish there were a way to check in and see if Zacchaeus *really* did it. We tend to assume he was good to his word. Still, I wonder, where was he one year later? Five years? Ten years?

But it's a mistake to think that this story is about Zacchaeus. This story is really about Christ's salvation; it's about Christ seeking out and saving the lost as he indicates at the end of the story, "Today salvation has come to this house, because [Zacchaeus] too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." Clearly, Zacchaeus was among the lost and now Jesus has found him.

Compare this story to the parable that preceded it which we heard last week. In that parable Jesus tells about two men praying at the Temple. One is a righteous Pharisee who thinks very well of himself and thinks God should, too. The other is a tax collector who knows he is a sinner and simply asks God for mercy. Jesus says that it is the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who will go home justified. Though the tax collector in the parable did nothing to change his behavior and only begged for God's forgiveness, this story following on the heels of that parable might suggest that reformation and repentance in his life would be the logical and necessary next step after his trust in God's mercy and justification from God.

As one commentator notes, "The story of Zacchaeus tells us that the gospel is about serious commitment to God, but it is also about joy."<sup>3</sup> This story also contrasts with the righteous and rich young ruler from the previous chapter who asks Jesus what he needs to do for salvation. When Jesus tells him he must sell all his possessions and give them to the poor, the man became sad because he was very rich and the implication is, he is unable to do as Jesus commands. But here, the sinful and rich Zacchaeus voluntarily does much the same, with no prompting from Jesus and is happy to do so.

Biblical scholar Elizabeth Johnson points out, "The character of faith and repentance in Luke is emphatically ethical. It is not sufficient to understand that Jesus is God's Messiah and to believe in him. One's life must reflect one's confession. Zacchaeus clearly

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Harmony of the Gospels* (Rio, WI: Ages Digital Library, 1997), 2:325.

<sup>3</sup> Laura Sugg, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 262.

understands and demonstrates this.”<sup>4</sup> And this is where a significant point of the Reformers comes in. Justification by grace alone through faith alone. We cannot earn God’s grace and salvation in any way. Through righteous living, through prayer or through charitable deeds. God’s grace is a gift freely given. We are asked only to accept God’s grace through our faith. But the faith is also a gift from God. Our faith does not earn us God’s grace, it is the proper *response* to God’s grace. But where some people get thrown off is in thinking that it ends there. Thinking, “if all I need for salvation is to believe then I believe. End of story.” But that’s not the end of the story. We are called to live lives that reflect that which we profess to believe. The faith of Zacchaeus is more mature than that of the tax collector in the parable, because his actions reflect his new-found faith. There is always a response to God’s grace. Faith is the beginning, not the end. It was John Calvin’s view that to encounter Jesus as Zacchaeus did, to encounter Jesus as the Word of God, is to commune with the light of God and reflect the glory of God.<sup>5</sup> Zacchaeus’s willing discipleship through right use of his wealth, his response to the grace shown to him through Jesus is a reflection of the glory of God.

In Frederick Buechner’s book *Peculiar Treasures*, he writes about Zacchaeus and puts him in a category with a number of less-than-perfect characters in the Bible, those who sinned but saw the errors of their ways, those who sinned and never did repent, those who were righteous, then sinned then repented. Buechner writes:

“Like Zacchaeus, they’re all of them peculiar as Hell, to put it quite literally, and yet you can’t help feel that, like Zacchaeus, they’re all of them somehow treasured, too. Why are they treasured? Who knows? But maybe you can say at least this about it—that they’re treasured less for who they are and for what the world has made them than for what they have it in them at their best to be because ultimately, of course, it’s not the world that made them at all. ‘All the earth is mine!’ says Yahweh, ‘and all that dwell therein,’ adds the Twenty-fourth Psalm, and in the long run, presumably, that goes for you and me too.”<sup>6</sup>

And that’s the extraordinarily Good News. We’re all, as Buechner puts it, peculiar as Hell. But if Jesus can find and save someone like Zacchaeus with all his sin and peculiarities, surely God’s grace is there for us, too.

Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed the tree to see Jesus. He yearned to have an encounter with Jesus just as we yearn for God. Maybe sometimes, just like Zacchaeus, we need to get out of our normal lives, change our point of view in order to have that direct encounter. We need to seek ways to climb out of our own wee little selves in order to encounter God. It takes courage to climb but also it takes the initial courage to recognize in ourselves the ways in which we are “wee.” It takes courage to recognize that we need to grow and climb in order to have the best shot at encountering God. We need to run ahead and climb that tree.

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<sup>4</sup> E. Elizabeth Johnson, *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Vol. 4* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 263.

<sup>5</sup> T. F. Torrance, *Calvin’s Doctrine of Man* (London: Lutterworth, 1949), 31.

<sup>6</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures: a Biblical Who’s Who* (New York: HarperOne, 1979), 204-5.

Jesus invites himself into Zacchaeus's home and life. And the same is true for us. Christ has invited Christself into *our* lives. How will we respond to the invitation? Like Zacchaeus, will we have courage in our faith and trust in God so that we can happily and joyfully accept the invitation to discipleship or will we, like the rich young ruler, walk away sadly? How will we seek God the way Zacchaeus sought Jesus? How will we be transformed by God's grace the way Zacchaeus was transformed by Jesus? How might our lives reflect God's grace?

Where is Zacchaeus now? Luke doesn't tell us whether or not Zacchaeus was true to his word. The end of the story is for us to write. The end of the story is for us to live out.