

## **Psalm 119: 137-144**

<sup>137</sup>You are righteous, O LORD, and your judgments are right. <sup>138</sup>You have appointed your decrees in righteousness and in all faithfulness. <sup>139</sup>My zeal consumes me because my foes forget your words.

<sup>140</sup>Your promise is well tried, and your servant loves it. <sup>141</sup>I am small and despised, yet I do not forget your precepts. <sup>142</sup>Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness, and your law is the truth. <sup>143</sup>Trouble and anguish have come upon me, but your commandments are my delight. <sup>144</sup>Your decrees are righteous forever; give me understanding that I may live.

## **Luke 19:1-10**

<sup>1</sup>He entered Jericho and was passing through it. <sup>2</sup>A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. <sup>3</sup>So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. <sup>4</sup>When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." <sup>5</sup>So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. <sup>6</sup>All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." <sup>7</sup>Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." <sup>8</sup>Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. <sup>9</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

## **Climbing the Tree October 30, 2016**

There is a story about a local fitness center that was offering \$1,000 to anyone who could demonstrate that they were stronger than the owner of the place. Here is how it worked. This muscle man would squeeze a lemon until all the juice ran into a glass, and then hand the lemon to the next challenger. Anyone who could squeeze just one more drop of juice out, would win the money.

Many people tried over time - other weightlifters, construction workers, even professional wrestlers, but nobody could do it.

One day, a short and skinny guy came in and signed up for the contest. After the laughter died down, the owner grabbed a lemon and squeezed away. Then he handed the wrinkled remains to the little man.

The crowd's laughter turned to silence as the man clenched his fist around the lemon and six drops fell into the glass. As the crowd cheered, the manager paid out the winning prize and asked the short guy what he did for a living. "Are you a lumberjack, a weightlifter, or what?"

The man replied, "I work for the IRS." Let that sink in for just a moment.

Our story this morning is a charming one, isn't it? A story that we have heard since childhood if we grew up in the church and one that has kept children in Sunday school classes singing for years:

*"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 as the Savior passed him by, He looked up in the tree,  
And he said, "Zacchaeus, you come down;  
For I'm going to your house today, for I'm going to your house today"*

A seemingly simple story on the surface...a tax collector up a tree looking to see Jesus, almost comical really, and yet, just below the surface, there is considerable depth which challenges us to think deeper and gives us

pause. It is a story of seeing and being seen, of being open to the moving of the spirit, and also, of no small amount of grumbling by some.

It reminds me that when you read the gospel stories you should always remember that if you think you know what God is up to you will usually find yourself, like the crowds surrounding Jesus, doing a lot of grumbling, when you discover who Jesus is rejoicing over and who he is using as an example of who is welcome in the kingdom, and today's story is no different.

Jesus is always choosing those who we would assume are lost and unacceptable as the focus of his life and ministry. That's what he said he came to do. Always looking for that "lost sheep" or "lost coin", making heroes out of people like the good Samaritan or celebrating the disgraced prodigal son. Those whom Jesus deems acceptable and good, the crowds often find to be losers. And like the prodigal's brother we do a lot of grumbling about that. It wouldn't have surprised me at all if Jesus had turned to the crowd and said "Surprise!" and I'm guessing Zacchaeus was as surprised as anyone.

Now we are all pretty familiar with the scene here, Jesus is passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem where he will be crucified. You can imagine the crowds beginning to gather as they hear that He is coming. Perhaps they are hoping for another public debate with the Pharisees or they've heard of the healing of the blind man that occurred just outside the town, another story of seeing Jesus and of Jesus giving sight to the blind. Or perhaps they are there for other reasons.

As you stand there with them in your imagination you sense a rustling of the crowd. Further down the line a murmur, an excitement, as Jesus comes into sight. If you've ever been to a parade you know what it's like. When Jesus stopped at the bottom of the sycamore tree and asked Zacchaeus to come down because today he was coming to his house, you can imagine the response of the crowd. "What! Jesus, don't you know who he is and what he does for a living? He doesn't care about God. He only cares about ripping us off." The crowd began to grumble and for good reason.

He was the chief tax collector...the worst...he is in bed with the Roman authorities, the political power of the day, oppressing his own people and making a good profit for himself as well. Always ready to squeeze a few more drops out of the lemon. We sometimes feel that way about taxes too, don't we? He was hated and rightly so because as a tax collector he was profiting from Rome's occupation of the Jewish lands at the expense of his own people and padding his own pay from what money he collected beyond what Rome demanded of him. In short he was taking advantage of his own people.

It was only last Sunday that we heard about another tax collector, who may even have worked for Zacchaeus, and how despised he was by the Pharisee who was praying so wonderfully that he was happy he wasn't like that man! Not an enviable profession to say the least. A sinner! And yet that is exactly who Jesus is looking for.

I also found it interesting that in the gospel, Jesus is always passing by at just the right moment? Did you ever notice that? We see it over and over in this gospel. Just when a man is twisted by demons, Jesus the exorcist passes by. Just when a centurion's servant falls ill or a grieving mother's son has died, Jesus is in town. Just when we think we are beyond the notice and reach of a loving, forgiving God, Jesus the Good Shepherd, the Forgiving Parent, sets out on his search. And just when a short, insecure extortionist is primed for a life changing experience, guess who is passing through Jericho? That's how the Holy Spirit works I guess.

So I can't help but wonder if Zacchaeus already had it in his mind that his life wasn't what he wanted it to be. That perhaps this Jesus was the one he needed to know and that he had already decided that he would seek him out. He would find a way to, at the very least, see him face to face.

The story tells us that he was short of stature and that the crowds were blocking his view which is why he climbed the sycamore tree. I am curious about his shortness and wondering if that isn't more about both his and our shortness. Not physical but perhaps spiritual or moral shortness, and how do the crowds or metaphorical crowds in our lives keep us from truly making the effort to see Jesus? How do the crowds in our lives...friends, work, school, politics, wealth, stress, television, family, and dare I say even religious beliefs keep you from seeing Jesus or seeing others as he did? What's in your way and what tree do you need to climb to see him?

In this story, it's not clear that Zacchaeus ever repented, though he did say he would give much to the poor and offered to pay four times any amount he defrauded anyone which would be considered by Jewish law a vow amounting to repentance and perhaps that happened before he climbed the tree. Perhaps he had, as we read in our Oprah Magazine, an AH! HA! Moment!

A moment that with the anticipated coming of Jesus into his sight that he was transformed and that no matter what... he was going to climb that tree and see Jesus. That if only he could get a glimpse of Him, his life would be different. See Jesus! And be seen by him. And when he sees us we all know that anything can happen! Transformation, rejoicing, repentance, restoration to community, priorities reversed!!! For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost!

Zacchaeus is a treasure to God. His name means "Righteous" and Jesus is letting us know that he is loved and accepted in the community, the family of God. That saints come in all shapes and sizes. Today Jesus is reminding us that we are all Zacchaeuses, that we are all Davids, all Rahabs and Aarons, all Bathshebas and Pauls, all Donalds and Hillarys, and Jesus feels so strongly about God's love for us that he is on his way to Jerusalem to lay down his life over it.

Like Zacchaeus we still live in a sinful world as children of Abraham. We are being asked to stop grumbling, to stop separating ourselves from community and from those God loves, which seems to be, at least in Luke's Gospel, sinners and outcasts. And every day we are called to eat with them, work with them, live with them, see and be seen by them, serve them and love them. To see them as the living treasures that they are.

I'm a firm believer that the Gospel story, like good drama, should ask good questions, make us think, and not necessarily give us the answers...it should break open our hearts and minds and give us the opportunity to choose! To decide...to transform...to change....

So...what is your crowd? What gets in your way of seeing Jesus or being seen by Jesus? Is it your assumptions about others or your political views? Is it your biases or prejudices? Is it the things you fill your mind and heart with? Is it your ego or feelings of insecurity? Is it your inability to forgive? Take a look at your crowd, and think about that.

And who is your Zacchaeus? Who are you grumbling to God about? Who are you refusing to see through His eyes? Who are you unwilling to admit into the Kingdom? The answers will be different for all of us and perhaps different on any given day. But what is it that will get you to climb the tree, to get higher? To get to a place where you can see Jesus and he can see you?

Because it seems to me that if you are moving in His direction at all, if you are here to worship, if you are reading the Bible, if you are praying to God, if you are doing these things, you are inviting Him for a visit. And like it or not, He's going to find his way to the base of your tree and say "Jim, Mike, Sarah, Bob, Hazel, Anna..." Come down, for I must stay at your house today for you too are a child of Abraham", and the rest, I guess, will be up to you. Let us pray.

## **Unlikely Companions**

John van de Laar

It was scandalous then, Jesus:  
your inappropriate choice of associations,  
your insistence on being with those  
who were least likely to be friends of God.  
It's scandalous now, Jesus!  
We like to think we're more gracious than that,  
but we still struggle  
with who you chose to include.

Yet, you also include us who, if we're honest,  
are just as unlikely,  
just as undeserving;  
And as we walk with you and work with you  
we discover others that journey beside us,  
and who find us to be just as much the unlikely companions  
that we find them to be;

So, we remember unlikely leaders,  
who with few resources and little influence,  
make significant contributions to the world;  
We remember unlikely healers,  
who through little more than their compassion,  
bring wholeness to broken and wounded others;  
We remember unlikely benefactors,  
who, with no wealth to speak of,  
give generously to those with even less;  
We remember unlikely saints,  
who, though tainted and stained, broken and imperfect,  
bring sacredness and life to hopeless ones

And as we pray, we celebrate all the Zacchaeuses,  
who, like us have been touched by your grace and forgiveness,  
and have become your unlikely companions  
in saving the world.

Amen.