

WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE JESUS

Sermon, October 30, 2016

Texts: Isaiah 53:1-6; Luke 19:1-10

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he ..." How many of you know and/or remember that song from your Sunday School days? *"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 coming to your house today, I'm coming to your house today.'*

I like the story about an old minister who was on his deathbed, and a young man who was also a minister came to visit him and offered to read to him from the Scriptures. *"Do you have any favorite scripture you would like to have me read?"* the younger man asked. *"Yes,"* said the old pastor. *"Please read First Chronicles chapter one."* The young man read the requested chapter ... as best he could. It was not easy. Chapter 1 of 1 Chronicles consists primarily of names. Hebrew names. Some *two hundred fifty* names in the fifty-four verses of that chapter; it's a lector's nightmare! And the old pastor listened with eager attention to every name. When the young man finished, the old man uttered a fervent "Amen." He said, *"Thank you, my son; that was so comforting."* Well, the young man was puzzled. *"Please tell me,"* he said, *"... what is so comforting about the chapter?"* *"Ah,"* said the old minister, *"just to think that God knew them all by name!"* Apparently, this godly gentleman took great comfort on his death bed in knowing God knew him by name, as well.

I think that's what's important in this story of Zacchaeus. We're told Zacchaeus climbed that sycamore tree because he wanted to see who Jesus was, but apparently Jesus already knew who Zacchaeus was ... He called him by name! Can't you see Zacchaeus so stunned by this that he nearly falls out of the tree? Apparently Jesus already knew who Zacchaeus was. Why is that significant? On one hand, you may think, *"Well, of course. Jesus is God incarnate, He knows everything."* But on the other hand, and without getting into the theological weeds about the full scope of incarnational theology, we know there were some limitations of the Divine's infinite attributes experienced by Jesus in His very finite human form. We do know from other sections of the Gospels the incarnate Jesus did NOT know everything.¹ And He certainly did not call everyone He met by name. So, WHY did Jesus know Zacchaeus? I think there may have been other reasons Jesus knew Zacchaeus other than divine prerogative.

This took place in Jericho, a thriving trade city located in between the Middle East and Far East; it was a gateway for all the commerce passing through the one region to the other. If you were in the tax-collecting business, it would be hard to find a better place to set up shop than Jericho. Most of the revenues collected from the taxes went to the Romans. Rome had discovered it was far more profitable to have indigenous locals collect their taxes in the different places of the empire. The practice was called "tax farming;" essentially tax collecting was farmed out to a series of native local contractors and subcontractors who collected tax money from an area they knew well. A local tax collector would have his finger on the pulse of business in the neighborhood. As a local resident, he knew what you did for a living, who your relatives were, what assets you had, and the less honest ones knew how much you could be squeezed. Anything extra they could collect for themselves after collecting Rome's portion of the taxes they could keep as their own income; this was permitted under Roman law ... and some tax collectors were fair, and some were not. Not all were bad, anymore than all accountants today are bad ... a good and honest accountant needs to have income, and that income is legitimately earned by responsibly managing other's finances; it was the same with tax collectors in that day. The tax collector was filling an existing office, and an honorable person who took that office would be in a position to do some real good in spite of the difficult situation of Roman occupation. The chief collector in Jericho was Zacchaeus. Like just about all the other tax collectors in that day, he was not well liked. Like all the other tax collectors, he was accused of being a collaborator with Rome and of making money milking an easily corrupted system. But note I say he was *accused* of doing so.

One day word spread through Jericho that Jesus was coming into town. People began pouring out into the streets in order to greet or see Him. We are told Zacchaeus, though, was unable to see Jesus. Why? Because, we are told, he was short. But WHO was short? If you look it up in the Greek (*which I know no one here will do, but trust me on this*), one really can't tell who is the short one ... it's very possible *Jesus* was the one being referred to; it really is unclear in the Greek text! I know that ruins the Sunday School song, but the story could be understood to read that the crowds were thick, and since *Jesus* was so short, Zacchaeus couldn't see Him, so Zacchaeus climbed the tree ... in short (*pun intended*), perhaps Zacchaeus couldn't see Jesus because *Jesus* was too short, and perhaps the crowds, who didn't like Zacchaeus, also worked to block his view. It's possible maybe this crowd eager to hang around Jesus wouldn't LET this despised tax man see Jesus ... so they intentionally crowded him out.

Now, with all the other good points to discuss in this Gospel reading, you might think it's odd that I would hit on this one. But you know, in spite of all the artistic depictions of Jesus down through the centuries as tall, manly and good-looking, don't forget the prophetic passage of Isaiah 53 read earlier speaks of the Messiah as possessing *no* physical beauty or particular desirability that would attract us to Him -- *"He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him."* And height is very attractive to us! According to extensive research

¹ See <http://www.gty.org/resources/bible-qna/BQ121712/what-jesus-didnt-know>

from 1987, taller men earn more money on average than their shorter counterparts. If you're 6'2" or taller, you're likely to start a new job at a salary 13% higher than someone under six feet. According to the research, each extra inch of height is worth an extra \$600 a year on average. 1,200 MBAs surveyed showed six-footers earning on annual average \$4,200 more than men under six feet in comparable jobs. (*Remember, this was 1987... in 2016 dollars, you can effectively double these financial figures*). Eighteen U.S. presidents have been six feet tall or higher, Abraham Lincoln being the tallest at 6'4". Thomas Jefferson was nearly 6'3"; in the year he was elected, the average height for men was only 5'4". In our culture, height is attractive, desirable, even a bit majestic ... all qualities the prophet predicted the One to come would *not* have! It's quite possible Jesus really was short; He identified with us in so many of our frailties, infirmities and weaknesses, perhaps He did so in this area as well. All short people, take heart!

Whether Zacchaeus was short or not, it may not really matter. Particularly in tough economic times, maybe we can better relate to the traditional interpretation, for when it come to finances we can all relate to someone who is a little short and up a tree! I only point this out to underscore how we need to let the Bible speak for itself; not all our traditional interpretations gleaned from these inspired pages may be correct. But here he is, this well-known chief official, climbing a tree so he can see Jesus. Why was Zacchaeus so eager to see Jesus? And perhaps another question to ask is this: Why doesn't the crowd around Jesus make room for Zacchaeus to see Jesus?

The Zacchaeus story is usually told with the assumption that what the crowd believes about Zacchaeus is true: They believe he is a crook; a despicable, smarmy, undignified Danny Devito character up in the tree. He's a rich guy, and he collects taxes, so he must be a crook, he must be a collaborator with the political powers that be. But ... what if he isn't? What if he is an honorable man? Note: When he hears Jesus wants to dine at his house, Zacchaeus is happy to welcome him! He welcomed Jesus gladly! This is not the reaction of a man with something to hide; apparently, he *really really* wants to see Jesus and when he learns Jesus is coming to his house, his immediate reaction is "Yippee!" The crowd, however ... *the people who were crowding around Jesus and preventing Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus ... this crowd is muttering and murmuring about Jesus, "Harr-umph, he's going to be the guest of that sinner."* Zacchaeus stops, we are told "he stood up" ... he stood up to that muttering crowd ... then turned to Jesus and said, according to our pew Bibles, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. If I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount!" Listen to this in the King James: "Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: 'Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I'll restore him fourfold.'"

The KJV (*in contrast to the NIV*) accurately renders the Greek verbs in Luke 19:8 in the present tense, which leaves open the very real possibility that Zacchaeus is *not* admitting guilt. In other words, he *could* be saying: "Jesus, you hear the nasty things these people say about me, but look — I always give half of everything I earn to the poor; always have, always will! And if anyone can show and/or prove I've cheated them, well, let them try ... if they can, I will pay it back four times as much! I'm an honest and honorable man, Lord, in spite of what they say!" Could it be possible Zacchaeus is one of the good guys? What if he is not using his political position and the money he handles to dishonestly line his pockets, but is really using the money to benefit the community and to help those in need? You can certainly tell a lot about a person by what they do with their money (*which, by the way, is a good insight to remember this election season*). Could it be he is one of the tax collectors who heard John the Baptist's instructions in Luke 3 to take no more than his fair share? Note Luke also gives us his name: Zacchaeus means "pure." Maybe he really is living up to his name. In this reading, the salvation Jesus brings is not the conversion of Zaccheus from an evil to a just man, but the salvation Jesus brings is to rebuke the crowd hanging around Jesus for pre-judging an imperfect but honorable man who is working in an unpopular occupation honorably and justly despite the allegations and innuendos directed his way! Perhaps this is a man of means who got involved in the politics of his time to do what he could to make his community better, to make the most out of the bad political situation of Roman occupation, who by taking this position is keeping others who may be far MORE corrupt and would selfishly use the position to do his neighbors harm.

In this interpretation, Jesus knew this man by name maybe because this man had a reputation among his peer officials (*but not the crowd*) as an honest man to be esteemed. Perhaps Jesus knew his name because this man really was a "true son of Abraham," a brother who is honorably doing what a true son of Abraham would do, despite his neighbors' antipathy toward him (*ed. note: if time allowed, I would have referred to Matthew 5:21-23 ... Jesus knows those who do the will of His Father*). In this reading, this man has a place of power that can be easily exploited, but he is not abusing it; he's using it for good. In fact, in this interpretation he is the epitome of Godly stewardship ... he is working hard to use his position of influence and power for honorable ends. In this interpretation, perhaps this is less a story of conversion than of inclusion and affirmation and "atta-boy" encouragement, while telling those of us in the crowd hanging around Jesus not to be so quick to judge others, warning us not to jump to conclusions, inspiring us to go out there and make the most of whatever situation we are in and to get planted right were we are in the midst of how it is with what we got to work for the betterment of the community and be generous and honorable so that we, too, would never be ashamed to immediately welcome Jesus into our homes. I could be all wet on this interpretation, but perhaps Zacchaeus deserves a better historical shake than he has received to date. ²

By the way, as a bit of an epilogue that might give weight to this interpretation ... Clement of Alexandria records for us that in the early church Zacchaeus went on to become the first bishop of the region of Caesarea.

² Insights here largely inspired by the following: <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/5200/zacchaeus-honest-and-tall>