

STANDING TALL AND HONEST

Sermon, November 3, 2019

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.'* From insights gained in lots of reading over the years, I've come to question some of the usual premises believed about Zacchaeus. Was he a wee little man? And was he a crooked little cheat before meeting Jesus? I don't think so.

The scene is 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 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 or money managers today are bad ... a good and honest accountant or money manager needs to have income, and that income is legitimately earned by commission from 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, and was accused of being a collaborator with Rome and of making money milking an easily corrupted system.

But accusations don't always mean the party is guilty. Even if the accusations are frequent and constant. That's important to remember in any era, no less so then than now ... especially with the plethora of unproven (and often unfounded) accusations flooding our media on a daily basis about government officials.

One day Jesus came to 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 all of you will do when you go home ... not*), one really can't tell who is the short one ... it's very possible Jesus was the "he" 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 maybe the crowds, who apparently didn't like Zacchaeus, also worked to block his view.

You know, in spite of all the artistic depictions of Jesus down through the centuries as tall, manly, good-looking, with thick hair, don't forget the prophetic passage of Isaiah 53 which 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 an October 2003 article in **Psychology Today**, taller people 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 2003 research, each extra inch of height is worth an extra \$789 a year on average even when gender, weight and age are taken into account. Nineteen U.S. presidents have been six feet tall or higher, Abraham Lincoln being the tallest at 6'4". Thomas Jefferson was 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 perceived as a bit majestic ... all qualities Isaiah predicted the Messiah 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. He could have been less Charlton Heston and more Danny Devito in appearance; we just don't know. All

short people, take heart! (*To be fair, we've had short presidents ... James Madison, 5'4", Martin Van Buren and Benjamin Harrison, 5'6", Ulysses S. Grant, 5'8"*). 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! 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?¹

The Zacchaeus story is usually told with the assumption that what the crowd believes about Zacchaeus is true: That he is a crook. 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!" He readily opens his house and, really, his life to Jesus; he has nothing to hide! 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.*" We are told (v. 8) Zacchaeus "stood up" to that muttering crowd ... imagine him standing tall and confident and turning to Jesus and saying, so everyone could hear, "*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!*" The very real possibility is that Zacchaeus is *not* admitting guilt, but protesting and proclaiming his innocence and proactive virtue! 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! That's no secret; it's what I do! 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!*" This is an honest man standing tall before the crowd!

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 and their position of authority. Note that Luke also gives us his name: In the original language, 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.

Lending weight to this interpretation is that Jesus certainly knew this man by name. Maybe He knew his name because man had a reputation among his peer officials (*but not the crowd*) as an honest man who got things done and really helped those in need. 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. 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 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 or to give ear to unfounded and unconfirmed accusations. And maybe it's meant to inspire 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!

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.

¹ Insights here largely inspired by the following: <http://www.ministrymatters.com/all/entry/5200/zacchaeus-honest-and-tall>