

STANDING TALL

Sermon, October 30, 2022

Text: Luke 19:1-10

We just read that this man named Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore fig tree because he wanted to see who Jesus was, but apparently Jesus already knew who Zacchaeus was ... in fact, He called him by name and tells him He is coming to visit! I can imagine Zacchaeus being so stunned by this that he nearly falls out of the tree! How ... or why ... would Jesus know Zacchaeus' name? I'm glad you asked! We'll get to that in a few moments.

The setting 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 honest, 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 political 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 more than likely 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? It's something I first came across in 2010, twelve years ago, which means that for my previous 26 years of ordained ministry, I held the more or less traditional understanding of Zacchaeus being a crooked little cheat ... but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit. 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 as short; it really is unclear in the Greek text! I know that ruins the Sunday School song (*and the song I sang for our Talent Show a few years ago*) but this 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 crowd, 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. Isaiah 53:1b -- "*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! When we last looked at this text, I cited an October 2003 article in **Psychology Today** which showed statistical evidence that 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 by some 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. Jesus could have been less Charlton Heston and more Danny Devito in appearance; we just don't know. So 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"*). But here he is, whether short, tall or normal size ... he's climbing a tree because he wants to see Jesus.

The Zacchaeus story is usually told in sermons and Sunday School lessons 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 stay at his house, Zacchaeus is HAPPY to welcome him! He welcomed Jesus gladly! This is not the reaction of a man who has something to "hide;" apparently, he *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 to Jesus; again, apparently he has nothing to hide! The crowd, however is muttering and murmuring about Jesus, "*Harr-umph, he has gone to be the guest of that sinner.*"

We are told Zacchaeus "stood up" to that muttering crowd ... imagine him standing tall and confident in front of that crowd, then turning to Jesus and saying with a loud voice, 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 King James Version more accurately leaves out "Here and now" (that's not in the original) and also leaves out the word "will", which translates in this manner, "*I give half of my possessions to the poor. If I've cheated anybody, I pay them back four times the amount* " Zacchaeus may be vindicating himself to Jesus against the grumbling of the crowd. It's possible to read Zacchaeus' statement this way: "*Jesus, you hear the nasty things these people say about me, but look — I 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 pay it back four times as much! I'm an honest man, Lord, in spite of what they say!*"¹

In this interpretation, we have an honest and honorable man who is standing tall and confident!

Could it be 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 or enrich his relatives, but is really using the money and his position to benefit the community and to more than generously help those in need? You can certainly tell a lot about a person by what they do with their money and with their position of authority. Note: Luke also gives us his name ... in the original Aramaic, Zacchaeus literally means "*the pure*" or "*the just.*" Maybe the honorable parents who gave their baby boy that honorable name did all they could to raise him to be the embodiment of that name, hoping and praying that he would grow up to be just, pure, righteous. Maybe he really is living up to his name! In this interpretation, the salvation Jesus brings is not the conversion of Zacchaeus, 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! We need office holders like this! A person 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 away who may be far MORE corrupt and would selfishly use the position to do fleece his neighbors ... and to boot, an official that readily and joyfully receives Jesus into his home! That's the kind of honorable people we want to vote into office next week!

Now: How or why did Jesus know his name? Again, I'm glad you asked. Maybe He knew his name because Zacchaeus had an excellent reputation among his peer officials (*if not the crowd*) as an honest man who made the most of the situation at hand, got things done, and generously helped his community and those in need. Perhaps Matthew, one of the twelve disciples who had been a tax collector, from his former professional ties knew about Zacchaeus and his reputation, so maybe Jesus came to town specifically to seek Zacchaeus out after hearing all about him from one of His closest followers! "*I know you, Zacchaeus, and heard all about you; I must come to your house today!*" 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 position of political power that can be easily exploited, but he is **not** abusing it; he's using it for **good**. 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 inspiring and encouraging us to 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 while being 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 I think 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>