

Climbing Trees for Jesus

The story of Zacchaeus encountering Jesus in today's Gospel passage, is a particular favorite of mine. At first glance, Zacchaeus seems like a most improbable hero. He's not just a tax collector, one of the Israelis who profited off their neighbors by collecting taxes for their Roman oppressors and skimming a generous cut off the top. Zacchaeus is the *chief* tax collector, which means his neighbors undoubtedly despise him as the worst of a bad lot. He's not just rich, he's rich because he collaborated with Pilate against his own people. And then, there's the matter of his height. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was "short in stature," so short, in fact, that he couldn't see Jesus over the shoulders of the crowd. One might expect that such a wealthy man might be insufferably proud and, perhaps, more than a little touchy about his diminutive stature. One might also imagine that the chief tax collector, one who made his fortune by cozying up to the Roman Empire, would have no interest in the comings and goings of a controversial prophet. Jesus has developed quite the reputation at this point in Luke's Gospel. Wouldn't it be more politically prudent for Zacchaeus to be seen hard at work in his office rather than out in the crowd when Jesus and his friends come through Jericho?

And yet, Zacchaeus abandons all dignity, runs ahead of the crowd and climbs a tree like an eager little kid just to get a glimpse of Jesus. His enthusiasm is richly rewarded. Jesus looks up at Zacchaeus in the tree, calls him by name and says "hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." His affectionate tone shocks the crowd – how is it that Jesus is so chummy with such a disreputable fellow? But Zacchaeus is unabashedly delighted. He immediately promises to give half his wealth to the poor and to repay anyone he's cheated fourfold. Jesus praises the little man: "Today, salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." It's a truly lovely moment.

I don't believe in coincidence when it comes to Scripture. Somehow, the Holy Spirit always knows exactly what we need to hear from week to week. Today, as we continue our stewardship journey, we're talking about our mission as a congregation. St. Luke's leaders have already done a marvelous job of defining our fourfold mission on the church's logo. We tell each other and the world that our mission is to seek to embody the love of Christ Jesus by welcoming everyone unconditionally, praying, learning and growing together, caring for one another, our communities, and creation, and working for justice in the church and the world. It's a beautiful mission, and I'm confident that Jesus very much approves.

But our logo doesn't describe exactly how we accomplish our mission. We're living in very challenging times, and not everyone understands Jesus's message the way we do. Some of our siblings in Christ are invoking the authority of Jesus to do ugly, bullying and even illegal things. Their actions make me personally angry and more than a little indignant on our LORD's behalf. If I don't watch myself, their shenanigans can provoke me into a whirlwind of self-righteous, arrogant virtue, doing all the right things in Jesus's name while muttering furiously under my breath about just how faithless, ignorant and downright laughable those terrible people are. And when I let myself indulge in that kind of sanctimonious condemnation of my fellow human beings, I'm no better than the crowd at Jericho, denouncing the little guy up in the tree and scandalized that the Messiah would treat such a scoundrel as a friend.

But here's the thing. Jesus is the second person of the Holy Trinity, entirely divine even as he became, for a time, entirely human. He, the Father and the Holy Spirit are all-powerful, eternal and all-wise. They really don't need little old mortal me to defend them; the idea that I even could is downright ludicrous. And the Father, in his infinite wisdom, chose to give humankind a breathtaking freedom of will even though He knew perfectly well the horrors that

we would inflict with it. That he had, and continues to have, that much faith in us continues to astound me. But as Christians, we are called to faith, love and *hope*. Paul's correct that the greatest of these is love, but hope is pretty terrific, too. It may be different for you, but when I let my faith be muddied with anger, sorrow or fear, hanging onto hope becomes all but impossible.

Today's Gospel passage offers us precious insights, beginning with the meaning of the tax collector's name. Zacchaeus is from the Greek, but it originates in the Hebrew זַכָּי, which means "innocent," or "pure." In this passage, Luke is telling us that the chief tax collector, a man who enriched himself through the oppression of his fellow Jews, is an innocent man in the eyes of God. And when Jesus treats him that way, miracles happen.

When Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name and invites himself to dinner, the little fellow is transformed by joy. Whatever greed led him to pile up treasure at the expense of his neighbors – who, incidentally, may have made his whole life miserable by ridiculing his height – evaporates in an instant. Seen and loved by the Son of God, Zacchaeus bursts with spontaneous generosity. It's a little early for Christmas stories, but I can't help thinking of the Grinch, whose shriveled heart exploded in size when he realized that love truly is what it's all about.

The Grinch is a character in a story; so is Zacchaeus, whatever the historical truth of his existence might have been. But, as I said, the Holy Spirit gives us the texts we most need when we most need them, and this morning's Gospel is no exception. I believe we can learn two things from Zacchaeus' story. First, people we loathe or mock remain children of God and live always in the hope of redemption. Accepting and befriending them may not always transform them, but perhaps God doesn't think they need transformation. He saw Zacchaeus as innocent, after all. That I might wish a Zacchaeus transformation for some of the people who are active in the news right now probably says more about me than it does about them. I can't promise that treating

people like friends even when they aren't will always turn them around. But I *can* promise that treating them like enemies or laughing at them never will.

Which leads to the second lesson of Zacchaeus' story. In his eagerness to see Jesus, Zacchaeus abandons all pride and behaves like an impetuous little boy. I can't think of a better example of someone who embodies Jesus's observation that we need to be like children to enter the Kingdom of God. You may feel, as I sometimes do, that your tree-climbing days are over. But we can still embrace our LORD with all the wonder, enthusiasm and joy of Zacchaeus, even if our feet stay on the ground.

We live in a time when our fundamental legal rights are threatened and profound disagreements threaten to tear our nation apart. It's a serious problem that calls for serious responses, and I don't want to minimize what's at stake. But there are plenty of people out there already proclaiming the end of the world, and we don't need to contribute to the doomsaying. When it comes to our faith, I believe we serve Jesus best when we are seriously joyful, deliberately exuberant, intensely loving and insistently hopeful no matter how dark our circumstances seem. As we, the people of St. Luke's Church, carry out our appointed mission, I pray we will do so with deep hope, love and joy. And I also pray that our joy will be obvious and infectious, healing whatever anger, fear and bitterness poisons the hearts of our neighbors and makes them vulnerable to the terrible mistake of believing that Christ is a God of vengeful condemnation and not of love. I pray that those who see us having fun as we serve our neighbors and each other will know we are Christian by our love, and they'll want to join in. So, as the Holy Spirit moves you, go out and embody the story of Zacchaeus. Go about the world doing Christ's work, and remember to enjoy it. Blow some bubbles, tell a joke, sing out loud, hug somebody. And, if you can, go climb a tree for Jesus. *Amen.*