

Year C Up in the Tree or Down on the Ground Proper 31 Luke 19 vv 1 to 10

Today we meet Zacchaeus. He is a tax collector in the city of Jericho and he is rich. This means that we, along with Luke's audience, are meant to go, "Eww...a terrible sinner." Tax collectors were seen as traitors – they were the Jewish people collaborating with the Romans to take money from the Jewish people and send it off to Rome to pay for roads and soldiers and so on. A *rich* tax collector was even worse. That means the person was collecting more money than he should be collecting in order to keep some for himself.

Zacchaeus, this traitor to his people, rich through supposedly unfairly and illegally collecting money from them, was being prevented by the crowd from seeing Jesus. This was probably at least somewhat intentional on the part of the people around him because they sure didn't like him very much. Apparently, it was quite easy to stop Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus because Zacchaeus was short. Not only was he short in physical height, he was also short on moral behaviour.

Zacchaeus...short, immoral, traitor....really wanted to see Jesus. The news of this amazing preacher, teacher, healer from Galilee... the one spreading the good news that God's kingdom was arriving...he was in Jericho and Zacchaeus was determined to catch a glimpse.

Now was a glimpse all he wanted? Probably not. If I said to you that I was going to see a parishioner after church, you would know that I meant more than just having a look at this person. You would know that I meant I was going to visit that person, sit and talk and maybe even have a cup of coffee or something. In the Gospels, "seeing" is often used as meaning more than just laying our eyes on someone or something. It often means knowing and understanding. So,

Zacchaeus almost certainly has more in mind than catching a glimpse of Jesus. Zacchaeus would really like to meet Jesus, to talk to Jesus. I believe we later find out why he is so eager to meet the preacher from Galilee.

Before we find out more about Zacchaeus though, we discover that Jesus wanted to see him. Jesus spots him up in the tree, calls him by name, and tells him he's going to stay at his place while he's in town. Perhaps you're like me and you wonder how it is that Jesus knew his name. It could simply be that Jericho is a small place – about 15 acres – despite being called a city by many, it had only about 2000 residents. A super corrupt traitor would be a well-known commodity. Jesus could very well have heard of Zacchaeus' reputation by the other residents. Or perhaps we are just meant to wonder if Jesus knew who Zacchaeus was because Jesus of Nazareth is God made flesh. Regardless, Jesus is looking for Zacchaeus as Zacchaeus is looking for him.

That's the way it goes with God. Our God is already looking for us before we choose to look for God. God is ready and waiting for those who will turn their lives to live according to God's ways in God's kingdom. Just a couple of weeks ago, we heard Luke tell us of the leper who saw that he was healed, saw that he had been made whole, and rejoiced in what God had done for him. Right before this story today, a blind man receives his sight from Jesus and becomes one of his followers. Our God is ready and waiting for us to notice God, to turn our lives, to ask for what will make us whole – for what will put us in right relationship with God and with others.

So, if Zacchaeus is already seeking Jesus and Jesus is already on the lookout for Zacchaeus, does this mean that Zacchaeus has already turned his life toward

God? The rest of the crowd sure doesn't think so. They grumble angrily about the fact that Jesus is going to stay at his house...the house of a sinner. Maybe Jesus knows something they don't know. Maybe Jesus knows something we don't know. We, like the crowd, are often pretty quick to label others when maybe we don't really know what we're talking about. And Zacchaeus certainly seems easy to label. Alexander Graham Bell was laughed at by the president of Western Union who said his telephone was a useless toy. The British Parliament told Thomas Edison that his electric light was unworthy of the attention of the scientific community (William J. Bausch, *Telling Stories, Compelling Stories*, p.23). Mislabeled goes in the other direction too. Christopher Columbus is now still heralded by many as a hero when, in reality his lack of math skills brought him to America rather than India and his contemporaries knew him to be arrogant and cruel in his treatment of the "Indians" he encountered.

For many years and by many preachers, this story of Zacchaeus has been seen as a classic conversion story. The horrible sinner meets Jesus and turns his life around as a result. He repents, converts, the end. There is a problem with this interpretation though. Zacchaeus never says he's been defrauding the people. He says, "If I have defrauded any one..." Zacchaeus has no admission of guilt in the story. He doesn't strike his breast and say, "Oh God, be merciful to me, a sinner" as we heard from the tax collector in last week's story. The translation of Zacchaeus' words from Greek into English very much leads us astray. They are given to us in the future tense. "I will give to the poor," we hear. "If I have defrauded anyone, I will pay back four times what I have taken." The Greek, though, is actually in the present tense. Zacchaeus is telling Jesus what he is already doing. "Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor."

In case we may think that Zacchaeus simply has a problem admitting to any wrongdoing, we can have a look at Jesus' response. Jesus does not turn to the grumbling crowd and tell them something like, "The healthy do not have need of a doctor, but only the sick" as he does elsewhere in Luke's Gospel. And Jesus never says anything to Zacchaeus about forgiving his sins as he does elsewhere in each of the Gospels.

What Jesus *does* say to Zacchaeus is that salvation has come to this house. If you remember a few weeks back, we learned that salvation means being made whole and Jesus is that salvation, that healing wholeness that comes to Zacchaeus. He does not offer forgiveness to Zacchaeus. He provides him with vindication. Jesus has looked beyond the rumours and malicious words of the crowd and truly sees Zacchaeus. In doing so, he provides salvation – wholeness. In his welcome and love of Zacchaeus he gives back to Zacchaeus the welcome and love of the community. Time and again, we witness Jesus bringing the people on the margins back into community with others through his healing of them. Today it is the healing of a reputation. "Your faith has made you whole," are the familiar words Jesus often says after he has accomplished the restoration of wholeness – a restoration of wholeness not only of the body, in the case of sickness, but also a restoration of mind and spirit because of the welcome and love now given.

Jesus cements this love and welcome by calling Zacchaeus a "son of Abraham." Jesus only uses the child of Abraham phrase twice in Luke's Gospel. Here, with Zacchaeus, and a little earlier with the bent over woman he heals on a sabbath (Luke 13:16). In both cases, Jesus is welcoming back people who had been marginalized by others but who are now made whole. In both cases, Jesus makes

clear that they had been wrongfully excluded. Excluded by those who label themselves as children of Abraham but who do not have the faith of Abraham.

We have all been up that tree with Zacchaeus at one time or another – wrongfully judged for something we were thought to have said or done or when something we have said or done has been misinterpreted. There is much damage done to people up in the tree – family members who haven't spoken in years because of a misunderstanding...the hurt and frustration of being the subject of a false rumour...friendships ended, families estranged...These are lost ones – lost in the sense that they have been cut off from community and perhaps they also feel lost from God. It is difficult to feel loved by God when you are not loved by the world.

Yet, there are people up in the tree because there are always people on the ground doing the misjudging. These, too, are the “lost” ones that Jesus speaks of at the end of the story. And we have all likely been one of the people on the ground as well – thinking the worst of someone's words or behaviour instead of asking for a clarification, labeling someone based on looks or surface knowledge instead of true knowledge of the person. Entire groups of people are often mislabeled with stereotypes: welfare people all milk the system; all drug addicts are bad people; immigrants are uneducated; Indigenous people smoke, drink, and live off government money.

We have all been misjudged and we have been one who misjudges. Jesus offers us the good news of the arriving kingdom no matter which position we are in. For all who have been slandered, thought ill of, pushed aside, Jesus tells us that, while people see appearances, God sees the heart. “No one else will break bread with you? Come down, I'll dine with you.” God sees the heart and loves deeply. This is

salvation – the making whole of a wounded soul in great need of knowing love and acceptance. For all who have done the misjudging, Jesus offers forgiveness. As Isaiah says of all who do wrong, “Let them return to the Lord, and [the Lord] will have compassion on them, And to our God, For [God] will abundantly pardon” (Is.55:5). This, too, is salvation – the making whole of a wounded soul in great need of knowing love and acceptance.

No matter which way you slice it, God offers salvation to all our wounded souls. Each time you turn or return to seek God, God is already there seeking you. It is, though, on us to look.