

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Climbing Trees”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Ordinary 31—November 3, 2019

Lesson: Luke 19:1-10

When I was little, we lived across the street from a triangle of land known as God’s Acre. At the top of this triangle, there were three churches—hence the name—and in the middle of the hill was an enormous hemlock tree that was decorated with lights for Christmas and was perfect for climbing. We could cross the street from our house and because the branches came right down to the ground, it was easy to climb right up that tree and gain a view that looked down on the Fire Station, on our house, and the numerous cars driving by, on all the action that occurred at that part of our town. It was a wonderful place of refuge and adventure, where we could see and not necessarily be seen. However, I don’t ever remember climbing the tree on Memorial Day when our town parade went by. There were never so many people in front of our house that we could not find front row viewing of the girl and boy scouts and veterans as well as the police and fire departments and the antique fire engines that went by. Even the year when General Omar Bradley led the parade, there was ample room for all of us to see.

That was not the case when Jesus entered Jericho. He was on his way to Jerusalem and the crowds were out in force. A chief tax collector named Zacchaeus who was rich was trying to see who Jesus was, but he couldn’t see through the crowd because he was short in stature, and nobody would make room for him. Nobody was inclined to do a favor for him because as a tax collector—in fact the chief tax collector, he was an assumed sinner, a collaborator, one who was corrupt, not the kind of person you’d want to be seen with and certainly not one to make room for, so Zacchaeus climbed up a tree. He was “great with respect to wealth, but small with respect to height.”¹ Some of you might remember the song:

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
And a wee little man was he;
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see.

Of course, we have no idea if Zacchaeus wanted to be seen. In our hemlock tree, we often thought we were invisible. We could see, but nobody else could see us, or would be looking for us. But when Jesus walked along those streets of Jericho, his head was high and he was looking all around and he saw Zacchaeus up in that tree. Frederick Buechner describes the story this way: “The sawed-off shyster is perched in the sycamore tree. Jesus opens his mouth to speak. All Jericho hugs itself in anticipation of hearing him give the man holy hell. ‘Woe unto you! Repent! Wise up!’ is the least of what they expect. What Jesus says is, ‘Come down on the double. I’m staying at your house.’ The mob points out that the man Jesus is talking to is a public disaster. Jesus’ silence is deafening.

“It is not reported how Zacchaeus got out of the sycamore, but the chances are good that he fell out in pure astonishment. He said, ‘I’m giving everything back. In spades.’ Maybe he even meant it. Jesus said, ‘Three cheers for the Irish!’

¹ E. Elizabeth Johnson, Luke 19:1-10, Exegetical Perspective, Feasting on the Word, Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C, Volume 4. © 2010 Westminster John Knox Press.

“The unflagging lunacy of God. The unending seaminess of human beings. The meeting between them that is always a matter of life or death and usually both. The story of Zacchaeus is the gospel in sycamore. It is the best and oldest joke in the world.”²

We don’t know what happened when Jesus was in Zacchaeus’ home. We don’t have any recordings of the conversation. Luke leaves that to our imaginations. What we do know is that Zacchaeus is changed. He is a different human being. In the language of the church, he repents. He gives half of his possessions to the poor and pays back four times more than any amount he defrauded anyone. It is more than anyone would have expected or imagined. And Jesus says: “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.”

Walter Wink who was a scholar of the New Testament used to suggest that the order in most of our church services is wrong. Most of us open with a hymn and then have a prayer of confession and then proclaim an assurance of pardon, as we do here, but Wink suggested that our Scripture suggests that we should begin the service with the assurance of pardon, and then celebrate that forgiveness in words and prayers and song and finally at the end, in the context of God’s forgiveness, that’s when we should confess our sin. Zacchaeus did not confess his sin before Jesus noticed him. He did not amend his life before being found worthy of Jesus’ attention. Jesus first saw him and celebrated his humanity, his worth, his value, and with that affirmation, Zacchaeus became a changed man. Zacchaeus’ repentance is not a condition of Jesus’ attention, but rather the result of it. That’s the gospel. As William Sloane Coffin once wrote: “Of God’s love we can say two things: it is poured out universally for everyone from the Pope to the loneliest wino on the planet; and secondly, God’s love doesn’t seek value, it creates value. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value. Our value is a gift, not an achievement.”³

For those of you who join our church today, it is wonderful to have you in our midst. We look forward to learning and serving together. You will discover that this special corner of God’s kingdom is not perfect, rather God’s love is perfect and together that love changes all of us; it transforms us to become the people God would have us be, people of grace and generosity and joy.

You may have heard me remind our young people about the words God speaks through Isaiah, that we are precious, honored and loved. The story of Zacchaeus is a good reminder of that reality.

Today we are invited to remember what it’s like to climb trees, to remember the view from up high and there to realize that we’ve been noticed. We’ve been seen by the one who knows everything there is to know about us—the good and the not so good—and he wants us to come down. He wants to grace our homes with his presence. He wants to affirm our worth. Come down on the double. He wants to be at your house today.

Let us pray: Come Lord Jesus, be our guest. Discover us in all the places we like to hide, in the trees we like to climb and encourage us to come down and welcome you. Remind us that we too are children of Abraham. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

² Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking A Theological ABC*. Harper & Row © 1973.

³ William Sloane Coffin, *Credo*, Westminster John Knox Press © 2004.