

Sermon preached by Bob Undercuffler

“SEE JESUS”

Luke 19:10

That is certainly a familiar and well-loved story. And it seems so simple.

A man who was despised by many is eager to see Jesus.

He's short so he runs up ahead of the crowd – climbs up into a sycamore tree ... and now he can see clearly – he can see almost everything –

But all he wants – is TO SEE JESUS.

And Jesus approaches ... the crowd pushes around him ... and Jesus' eyes catch a man ... a grown man, perched precariously up in that tree – and their eyes meet ... “Zacchaeus, hurry, come down for I must stay at your house today.”

So Zacchaeus hustles down that tree and happily welcomes Jesus.

What in the world was going on with Zacchaeus anyway?

He was rich.

He was a tax collector, but more ... he was a **chief** tax collector.

He had everything.

Ok, so he worked for the hated Romans/after all he collected taxes (and these were definitely taxes paid without representation) and most of the tax receipts were sent off to beautify Rome and to secure the Roman way of life.

But it was a good living and being chief tax collector, he had cronies working under him...Buddies in this tax collecting enterprise who would get together on Thursday nights and play poker (or whatever you played back then).

That kind of eased his isolation from almost everyone else ... because most everyone loathed these tax collectors. They were corrupt. But you have to make a living and provide for your family and for those who worked under you.

So now here is Zaccheaus running ahead of the crowd and climbing a tree ... **TO SEE JESUS.** One thing men of that day ... mature men ... men of wealth and stature **ONE THING THEY DID NOT DO WAS RUN. It was culturally unacceptable.**

And climbing a tree? That was laughable. He's a grown man. Children climb trees! I recall making a pastoral visit some years ago ... visiting a family in their back yard ... and the children were playing. Their son climbing the tree that spread over us ... it was clear he had done this many times ... “Look mommy ... “look daddy” ... they almost ignored him. I was intrigued ... a little

distracted ... our conversation continued ... and then rustling through the branches ... and thud ... there he was sprawled-out next to us. That certainly caught our attention. Thankfully, I didn't have to administer last rites. But climbing trees is a kid's business, for they bounce back.

But Zacchaeus (we don't know how old he was) but he certainly had some years on him. He was a CHIEF tax collector, for crying out loud. **BUT HE BOTH RAN AND CLIMBED A TREE IN ORDER TO SEE JESUS.**

I wonder ... Why this burst of energy? Going way beyond cultural norms? Why?

I wonder, was some discontent stirring in Zacchaeus?

Perhaps he was hungry for and therefore seeking something more in life. And he was willing to look foolish in order to find it. God seldom becomes important or real to the comfortable,
the self-satisfied.

To those who have it all.

Who know it all.

So perhaps there was an aching void in Zacchaeus's life.

Perhaps Zacchaeus felt a certain emptiness.

A hope for a better way.

A higher calling.

Eager for some transcendence in his life,
some link with the eternal.

"If with all your heart you truly seek him, you will certainly find him ..."
sings the prophet. And Zaccheus was willing to run ahead and climb a tree. And see Jesus.

Perhaps Zacchaeus longed for a friend he could trust ... someone beyond those work cronies ... the only thing that bonded them was that Zacchaeus had hired them ... and their weekly poker nights, but they listened to the same stories and laughed at the same old jokes ... and the conversations were about how they raised the tax rate and had fleeced the people ... and they whined about how they got no respect. But they didn't care. They were making a good living. **BUT PERHAPS ZACCHAEUS DID CARE.**

So here's how I see it ... for all his wealth, and cronies and comfort, Zacchaeus was searching. Still searching. He had heard of the man of Nazareth. That Jesus was someone special, someone from the divine, and Zaccheaus set out to see him.

But in that gathering throng, not a chance.

With his name and reputation and lack of stature, he was certain only to be jostled, elbowed, smothered by the smells of those bustling around him.

So Zacchaeus swallowed his pride, hiked-up his robes and ran on ahead of the mob, to a Sycamore tree which he climbed, high in the overarching branches, a quite ridiculous sight balanced there over the road. I'm told that in Jericho they still show tourists the tree. A great tree for climbing. And for seeing.

And while he is holding-on up there, uncomfortable and embarrassed, and far more hungry than we can ever imagine ...and desperately **HOPING**, JESUS comes to him. **Jesus sees Zacchaeus.**

And here is what this story is all about, **how Jesus enters our life.**

Jesus teaches about God not only in words, but by how he acts...

especially in how he acts. Jesus acts out the ways God works in this world. Jesus looks up and sees Zacchaeus. Jesus looks around ... **and sees you. Sees me.**

And what do we see here? What did Zacchaeus see here?

Not a God who is passive and distant and impersonal and criticizing and judging.

But rather, God who relentlessly pursues us in love and acceptance and embrace as we are open for something more ... alert to his presence, available for his friendship.

We miss something of the power of this story because eating together no longer has the same power that it had in Jesus' time. In Jesus' day, to eat with others was the most intimate form of friendship,

It was a deep recognition and celebration that this family – that our family - is way broader than we could ever imagine.

That's why the uproar throughout the whole town of Jericho. That's why all the grumbling.

"Jesus has gone to be the dinner guest of one who is a sinner," they grumbled.

That is, someone who is outside our circle, who doesn't belong to us or to our God, clearly outside the love of our God.

Here's the fact of the matter ... Jesus was eventually killed because of his eating habits, his resolve to include at the table those whom everybody else has excluded.

So the God that Jesus portrays here comes and takes a chance.

Jesus seeks-out, pursues, embraces, forgives before he demands.

So this story is a living word to Zacchaeus and to you and me that no matter how we have messed up,

no matter how downhill the day has gone,
no matter how we have tended like Zacchaeus

to put our own survival first,
God does not abandon us.

We are welcomed unconditionally,
 just as we are, by the most important person in our
 life, Jesus. God with us.
 Come, let us keep the feast.

You don't have to prove yourself. You don't have to become somebody you
 are not. You with your receding hairline and graying hair and your sometimes
 nasty temper, your credit cards and debt and college degrees, your
 forgetfulness and your failure to always be kind, your occasional
 defensiveness and tendency to neglect others, all the stuff that does bother
 you really if you are honest, that drags you down, and all the stuff that seems
 to push you into a hollow self- sufficiency and complacency,

never-the-less you count with Jesus.

He wants you to know him and trust him and eat with
 him.

“Zaccheus, hurry up and come down, for I must
 stay at your house today.”

That's the God who in Jesus comes to dinner,
 the God who accepts and embraces just as we are.

But now there follows another, somewhat sobering note.

We can tell when this God has come to dinner, by whether anything is
 happening to us.

The test of our trust in God's love is whether we find ourselves
 loving like Jesus, reaching out beyond our crowd to the outsider,
 to the lonely, to the lost.

Zacchaeus responds to his dinner partner's presence by professing,

“Look, half of my estate I will give to the poor,
 and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four
 times as much.”

Jesus hasn't asked this of Zacchaeus. But Zacchaeus reaches out.

It is the transforming power of the love of God taken seriously.

And the language makes it clear that he is doing far
 more than conventional morality requires.

Half of his estate. Four-fold restitution. There is no law
 anywhere that requires anything like that.

Nothing like that in the Presbyterian Book of
 Order.

Nothing to that extent expected when we
 join the church.

But Zacchaeus has ceased to worry so much about his own life, his
 own place in the universe (or his place in Jericho) rather, **OUT OF**

GRATITUDE for Jesus' generosity he has become a generous and giving human being.

Generous, far beyond what might be written on a church pledge card or placed in the offering plate.

Here, members and friends of Head of Christiana,
is the only power that really changes anyone,
the power of acceptance/of a relationship freely
given and gratefully received.

You can tell who has truly been encountered by the love of God. Like Jesus they are always growing, changing, stretching, giving, including, embracing.

Oh, and there is one thing more. Wonder of wonders.... Zacchaeus started out a wealthy tax collector. And Jesus gives him a new name. Zacchaeus is recognized a son of Abraham. That identity reaches way back to the earliest days;

"Now the Lord God said to Abraham, Go to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, so that you will be a blessing to others and in you ... through you all the families of the earth will be blessed." (Genesis 12)

That's what you always get from Jesus, a new name, son, daughter of Abraham and Sarah, a new identity -- child of God. Because in the final analysis that's the only name that counts.

Let us pray.

Amen