

UP IS DOWN

SHERARD EDINGTON

Luke 19:1-10

Thanks to that little Sunday School song, we are all familiar with the character of Zacchaeus.

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.

And when the Savior passed that way
He looked up and said, 'Zacchaeus,
You come down, For I'm going to your house today!
For I'm going to your house today!

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
But a happy man was he,
For he had seen the Lord that day
And a happy man was he;
And a very happy man was he.

What we know from this song is that Zacchaeus was not a tall man; he was 'vertically challenged' as we might say. Jesus was passing through his town and Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus so he scaled a sycamore tree. Jesus spots him in the tree and invites himself to Zacchaeus' house. Zacchaeus was pleased by this because he gets to see Jesus.

The song is pretty close to scripture. I want to take the time to dig a little deeper into this wonderful story.

We are coming to the end of Luke's travel narrative. Jesus is getting closer to Jerusalem. The last stop on the road to Jerusalem is Jericho. Today's reading begins *Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it*.

In the city of Jericho was a man named Zacchaeus. Luke tells us that not only was Zacchaeus a tax collector, he was the chief tax collector. And then Luke tells us that he was rich. That is not a coincidence. We don't have to read between the lines to see what is being implied here.

Tax collectors were not well-liked by the people because they were seen as being co-conspirators with the Roman government in its oppression of the Jewish population. In addition, tax collectors were notorious for cheating people out of their

money. And Zacchaeus is the chief tax collector. Earlier in this gospel, Luke highlights the disdain directed toward tax collectors. In chapter 5, Jesus calls the tax collector Levi to follow him and then has dinner at Levi's house. This upsets the Pharisees who lump tax collectors and sinners into the same category.

In chapter 15, the Pharisees gripe that Jesus *welcomes sinners and eats with them*. This includes tax collectors.

In chapter 18, you will recall that parable about the Pharisee praying in the temple who boasts about not being like other people who are sinners especially that tax collector over there.

Zacchaeus—the tax collector—catches wind that Jesus is coming through town and Luke tells us that *He was trying to see who Jesus was*. We don't know how much Zacchaeus knew about Jesus, but certainly enough to pique his curiosity. He wanted to see this man but because of his height, he couldn't see over the crowds. So he runs ahead on the road until he finds a tree he could climb to get a better view. It is possible that it was not just a matter of not being able to see over the crowd but that the crowd actively positioned themselves in front of him. It was a cruel p with the short tax collector.

Of course, Luke's congregation would have laughed at the image of a grown man climbing a tree. Children climb trees, not grown men. How ridiculous is that?

Zacchaeus' persistence pays off, for when Jesus comes to the tree, he looks up and says, *Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today*. It is interesting that although Zacchaeus did not know who Jesus was, Jesus knows him.

Zacchaeus hurries down from the tree and gladly welcomes Jesus to his home. Those watching grumble about this and say, *Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner*.

Now, that is the first half of the story. The second half takes place in Zacchaeus' home. Zacchaeus stands before Jesus and says to him, *Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much*.

What we find here is a wonderful story of repentance. Because of his interaction with Jesus, this sinner, this tax collector, promises to make amends. He promises to give generously to the poor and to make restitution to anyone he may have swindled.

His promise to return four times far exceeds what is required by scripture. The book of Leviticus requires that stolen money must be repaid plus twenty percent. The law demands repayment of 120%; Zacchaeus is promising a repayment of 400%.

In response, Jesus says to Zacchaeus, *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.*

And that is what Zacchaeus was seeking—salvation. He attains it through Jesus. Jesus identifies Zacchaeus as a son of Abraham, a child of Abraham. When Jesus healed the lepers, they are able to return to society. In the same way, Zacchaeus is able to take his place among his people. He is no longer a sinner.

This is a perfect story for a sermon. The lesson is clear: If we are sinners, then we must seek out Jesus, make amends for our sins, and be forgiven.

But I believe there is more going on here.

The first clue is to be found in the verbs in verse 8. Traditionally, we read this verse in the future tense, that Zacchaeus promises that he will give to the poor, that he will pay back. The Greek verbs are actually in the present tense and Zacchaeus is saying that he is giving to the poor, that he is paying back. While the traditional translation offers a much cleaner story, the alternative is more complicated. It is also more in keeping with the logical arc of Luke's gospel.

Stay with me, please.

One thing you will notice is that Zacchaeus neither confesses his sins nor repents to Jesus. He just climbs a tree. When Jesus goes to Zacchaeus' home, everyone around grumbles, and it appears that in response to these complaints that Zacchaeus tells Jesus what he has been doing—giving to the poor, paying restitution. As one scholar puts it, "I suspect that Zacchaeus is not turning over a new leaf as much as he is lifting up an old one for all to see." Maybe Jesus had heard of this tax collector who gave to the poor.

As we have seen time and again in Luke's gospel, Jesus sides with those on the margin, those considered down and out, those that world overlooks. Although Zacchaeus is rich, he is nevertheless despised by his neighbors. He is shunned. He is labeled a sinner.

In the previous chapter, a rich man when asked to give away all he had departs Jesus in sadness. The people watching this are shocked. If that rich man who follows God's laws can't be saved, then what hope is there for the rest of us? Jesus tells them that it is nearly impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom. *It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.*

Up to this point in Luke, there seems to be little hope for the rich. But here, as we near Jerusalem, Luke doesn't burden us with the belief that the rich are shut

out. In chapter 18, when the people asked, *then who can be saved?* Jesus replies, *What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.* We can't, but God can.

Zacchaeus' response to Jesus provides a fitting reversal to the episode of the rich ruler we looked at recently. There, the ruler refuses to let go of his possessions and follow Jesus. Zacchaeus, on the other hand, without Jesus even asking him, does what Jesus urged of the ruler. This tax collector, therefore, becomes an example of what Jesus said about the rich. The camel can go through the needle; the tax collector can attain salvation.

With the story of Zacchaeus, Luke shows his people that all things are possible with God. If Zacchaeus can be a child of Abraham, then Luke's congregation of Gentiles can as well.

As we near the end of the Travel Narrative, we may be asking ourselves the same question the people asked earlier: *who can be saved?* The answer is that with God anything is possible. It is not about money or righteousness or standing; it is determined by one's humility. By climbing up into the tree, Zacchaeus lowered himself, he humiliated himself in order to see Jesus. Twice in this gospel, Jesus has said, *For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*

In the parable of the two men praying in the temple, we would expect that it was the self-righteous Pharisee who would be rewarded. He has done all that was required of him. But no. It is the tax collector who quietly confesses and asked for God's mercy. He is the one who goes home justified.

The story of Zacchaeus can be a story of repentance but we can also see it as a story of hope and a call to humility.

For those who feel shut out from God, who feel lost, who feel that they have come up short, Luke offers us Zacchaeus as a reminder that with God all things are possible. Anyone can be a child of God.