When I was in seminary, I did a whole lot of walking with Cotton the dog. We used to wander up and down the Cumberland Plateau, by herds of deer on the trails, enjoying the paradise of Sewanee.

Now there are lots of odd features on a sprawling Episcopal college. And one odd feature that I'll always remember as the dog and I would walk past a rolling pasture with thoroughbred horses... was a boat.

Maybe I’m not describing this fully enough. Picture a larger, steel version of the SS Minnow from Gilligan’s Island, about 45 feet long and 20 feet high, perched imposingly on a platform at the very highest point of Monteagle mountain.

It sat high above the ground, in a field, on the far side of a barbed wire fence, surrounded by university thoroughbred horses, milling about, doing horse things.

It was bright red and sharp white paint job shone in the sun. But the absurdity of this landlocked sea vessel was ever present.

I'd never walked in that direction before, so the first time I saw it, I was mesmerized. It was foggy, and the dog and I stopped and froze, seeing this THING looming out of the mist. I looked around, thinking I’d walked my way to some Mt. Ararat, with this ark out there in the field. I expected to see animals coming two-by-tow down a gangplank.
Well, one day, there was quite a bustle brewing in town. Word on the Sewanee Classifieds--that’s basically Sewanee’s version of Craig's List--word was that the boat was being moved. The builder – a psychology professor – had finally gotten his life in order enough to retire and take her to sea.

Seriously! He was moving from his home on the mountain, trucking her clear down to Hale's Bar, near Chattanooga, where she’d be plopped in the Tennessee River, and he’d meet up with her somewhere downstream.

He and his wife would eventually cruise down the Mississippi river to the Caribbean and Atlantic, presumably with rum and a parrot and not a care in the world to weigh the ship down as they plundered coastal resorts and just enjoyed life.

Now, you may think the moving of a boat shouldn’t be that big of a deal, but, remember, we’re talking about Sewanee. With roughly 2500 residents and another 1500 students, it’s a small town. We gathered earlier that Spring with lawn chairs and beer coolers to watch when a stoplight was installed on the corner of University and Georgia Ave.

Moving this boat, NO, this fixture of the landscape of Sewanee, was huge. This was literally the biggest structural change to the town in a decade, bigger than the installation of the new scoreboard at the football field. This was a big deal.
And I have to say, it was one of the weirdest, small town-iest things I’ve ever experienced. The whole town stopped. The mail carrier, teachers, professors, kindergarten students, seminarians, we all interrupted our routine to watch the puzzle unfold. It was as if the university had spontaneously dismissed classes for the day.

We lined the road as the lead pickup came down the lane at a crawl, lights flashing. The university's historian and archivist who was also the chief of the Volunteer Fire Department was standing in the bed of the truck with what looked like one long crutch. The onlookers leaned in to their neighbors and guessed what this bizarre tool was for.

When the boat approached the one low-hanging electric wire, lazily stretched above the street, his truck pulled over, and he notched the wire in the crutch’s curved saddle top. He raised it as high as the wire’s tension would allow, and the boat, heaved up on a very low flatbed trailer like a beached whale, passed harmlessly underneath.

The entire crowd held their breath, then spontaneously erupted in applause as the boat cleared its final barrier. And off it went, smooth sailing down the mountain. It was quite the spectacle.

But here’s the funny thing about that spectacle. I really didn't know the professor who was building it. I didn't know he had never built a boat before,
that he'd never worked with steel. I didn't know that he had taught himself this craft while he was building this craft. I didn't know he was a well-known amateur ecologist who founded the Island Ecology Program on the Georgia coast and was going to use his trawler to do occasional research.

I didn’t know any of that back story before the day of the Great Boat Move of 2012. All I knew was that there was a weird boat in a field and a crowd gathered within spitting distance of my house. I learned all that, only became enamored with the romantic, bohemian story because I started chatting up the crowd.

But even I stopped, and the story and the spectacle held my attention for an afternoon. We had all seen something we would never see again, and something about it was important to us.

I wonder if that’s what this gospel scene was like for Zacchaeus. This is one of those biblical stories that leaves the back story out. We only know there's a parade, a boat moving down the road. Jesus is coming into town!!!

We know a whole slew of folks have stopped whatever it was they were doing to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he walked by, and we know Zacchaeus stopped whatever he was doing, too, and joined the crowd.
But we don’t know why. We don’t know if he was there because he believed Jesus was something special, if he believed Jesus was the Messiah, or if he was just curious to see what the hubbub was all about.

We do know he’s a bit on the shorter side, so he had to climb a tree just to see beyond the crowd. And he caught a glimpse of Jesus. And Jesus caught a glimpse of him.

And Jesus tells Zacchaeus that he’s going to crash at his place tonight.

We don’t know a whole lot more. The text is pretty vague. So we get to speculate about Zacchaeus.

Maybe he was a new, dedicated Jesus follower, a tax collector harboring a secret about his faith, and his next action, giving away so much of his money, changing how he interacts with the world to serve the God before him, a beautiful response to an encounter with God.

But maybe, just maybe, Zacchaeus is actually living fully into the life of being a chief tax collector, extorting and living off the work of others, and he's only caught up in the spectacle of an oddly interesting parade.

Maybe Zacchaeus is caught off guard, sees someone with a great deal of power, and responds the same way he might to meeting a governor or an emperor.
He bargains. “Look, Jesus, half of my possessions? I’ll give ‘em to the poor. All that cheating and stealing? I’ll pay it back fourfold.” I mean, I don’t think he’s weaseling on purpose necessarily. I just think this is how he has learned to make it in the world, so he keeps on making it as he knows how. And he wants to know what it costs to get on the good side of Jesus.

And I think what's important may NOT be Zacchaeus at all – but the crowd. Because either way, no matter what Zacchaeus' motivation is – the crowd hates it that this guy who has it all, mainly because he’s taken it all from them, gets some attention from Jesus.

And in the midst of all this grumbling, Jesus stops everyone in their tracks, Zacchaeus included. “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.”

That's it. There’s no “thank you for your loving gift.” And there’s no admonition from Jesus that Zacchaeus is going at it the wrong way. There’s no speech on the dichotomy of rich and poor or slave and Greek. All those issues can be worked out later.

Right now, for Zacchaeus, at the end of this parade, there’s only salvation. Jesus offers it, and Zacchaeus takes it.
And just like that, a son of Abraham has been saved. Not because he's perfected his life, but because he glimpsed something during that weird day when the parade came to town, something unusual, something he never would have imagined.

Zacchaeus doesn’t receive God’s grace because he paid for it, doesn’t receive God’s grace because he earned it. Zacchaeus had some kind of faith, maybe just a flicker, and he just accepted it. And that's all that matters.

And today salvation has come to this house, too. It doesn’t come because we have great liturgy. It doesn’t come because we give more than our neighbors. It doesn’t come because we serve the world. Salvation comes to this house because Christ is here. Period.

You know, people don’t line the streets like they once did to see Jesus, not even here in the South. Maybe it’s because we don’t expect to see him. Maybe we really don't want to see him because waiting for him is easier than meeting him.

So maybe this is what Zacchaeus is teaching us. Maybe, regardless of Zacchaeus' motivation, we should be more like him, out on the sidewalk, straining for a glimpse of Jesus coming down the road.
Because there’s still a beauty in looking for Christ, a beauty that shapes our souls and makes that image easier and easier to find. Because the more we look for Christ, the more of him we will see.

Maybe that’s our call, as fallible people of God. Maybe Zacchaeus shows us how to search, to be intent on finding Christ and being surprised when it pays off.

Zacchaeus calls on us to stop what we are doing and go down to the spectacle we call life and look around and see what we can see.

Because Christ will be there, offering all of us sons and daughters of Abraham, offering all of us with our flickering faith. . . .offering all of us the grace of God.