

Seeking the Lost

Luke 19:1-10

John Breon

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus and know who Jesus is. But the crowd was a barrier to his quest. Most of the people saw Zacchaeus as a “sinner”—someone they wouldn’t associate with. They saw him as having little status in the community, as insignificant. Zacchaeus’ desire to see Jesus drove him and he was persistent in spite of the crowd’s opposition. The church ought to be a place where people can see Jesus and get to know him. Folks shouldn’t have to overcome the church’s resistance in order to meet Jesus. Instead of putting up more barriers, we need to remove barriers that block people from Jesus and that keep them from all that God has for them.

We want to reach and receive people into faith, into the community of God’s people, into the fellowship of Christ’s followers. That means creating a climate that makes them feel welcome and safe. If people are going to stumble, let it be over the real scandal of the Gospel and not over cultural barriers or the unfriendliness of church people (How many times have we heard stories about a newcomer sitting in church and being told by an old timer, “You’re sitting in my pew”?). We can maintain the integrity of the Gospel and the church and good tradition while relating to people in an open way. That requires some flexibility, being willing to change what needs to change.

God calls the church to be the Body of Christ, to embody the gospel, to show God’s grace in our life together and in our compassion and service in the world. People who are seeking life and meaning and purpose and power to overcome will be drawn to look for those things in the community of God’s people.

Zacchaeus was seeking. He wanted to see Jesus and know who Jesus is. But who’s the true seeker in Zacchaeus’ story? Let’s look at the story again.

Jesus is passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. On the outskirts of Jericho, Jesus had met and healed a blind beggar. Now, on his way through the city, Jesus meets and saves a rich tax collector.

Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector. The Romans contracted out to people to collect tolls, customs and various fees for them. A chief tax collector of a city or an area would hire others to help with the collection of these fees. The Romans expected their pay up front. The tax collector then had to make back what he had paid the Romans plus meet expenses and make a profit. Such a system was open to corruption. And Zacchaeus was right in the middle of it.

But when Zacchaeus hears that Jesus is in town, he wants to see him. Something in Zacchaeus responds to something he has heard about Jesus. It's surely more than mere curiosity that makes him so determined to see Jesus. Maybe he's heard about the kinds of things Jesus teaches and the miracles he does. Maybe he's heard that Levi/Matthew, the tax collector from Capernaum, left his business and now follows Jesus. Maybe Zacchaeus has heard about how Jesus spends time with and eats with tax collector and other "sinners."

A rabbi—some say a Messiah—who is a friend of tax collectors? That would be a switch. Everybody looks down on tax collectors because their dealings with Gentiles make them unclean and exclude them from Israel's religious life. They look down on them as traitors because they support the Roman occupying force and help fund that pagan empire.

And people literally look down on Zacchaeus. As a small person, he's known what it's like to be ridiculed and stepped on. He was determined to get to the top so that people would look up to him. Chief tax collector in Jericho is the place to make a lot of money and wield a lot of power. Jericho is a wealthy city and several trade routes run through it, so there are many tolls and fees to collect. But the very job that brought Zacchaeus wealth and prestige also brought him the scorn of his neighbors.

Maybe, just maybe, if he can see this Jesus life could be different for him somehow. But Jesus has attracted a crowd as he moves through Jericho. Short as he is, Zacchaeus can't see over the crowd. Unpopular as he is, the crowd won't give way and let him through. So he runs down the road

behind the crowd and finds a tree he can climb that will give him a good view of the road and of Jesus as he passes by.

Finally, Zacchaeus sees Jesus. He's leading his disciples up the road and the crowd is swirling around him. He doesn't look extraordinary, certainly not like a king, and yet there is something special about him. Is Zacchaeus wondering what it would be like to meet Jesus? To be his follower? Hidden in the branches of the tree, he may be imagining such a relationship. But can he risk going to Jesus? And how embarrassing if people see someone of his position sitting in a tree.

Then Jesus stops at Zacchaeus' tree. He looks up and sees Zacchaeus. He says, "Zacchaeus, come down right now. I must stay at your house today." *Jesus is seeking Zacchaeus.* Jesus wants to share Zacchaeus' hospitality.

Hardly able to contain his excitement—"He noticed me! He wants to be a guest in my home!"—Zacchaeus hurries down from the tree. He forgets to be embarrassed. He begins right then to show hospitality to Jesus. With joy he welcomes Jesus to come home with him and be his guest.

People in the crowd start to grumble their disapproval of Jesus' choice of homes to visit. "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." Pious Jews would avoid someone like Zacchaeus whom they perceived as breaking the law of Moses. But Jesus seems especially eager to spend time with Zacchaeus. In the Jericho crowd Jesus meets the same reaction to his fellowship with outcasts that he has met elsewhere.

Hearing all this grumbling, Zacchaeus speaks up and says to Jesus, "Look, Lord! I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I pay back four times the amount." That ought to quiet these grumbling busybodies! I wonder if Zacchaeus starts thinking, "What am I saying? Why would I do such a thing for this Jesus?"

Jesus then announces, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to *seek* and to save the lost."

Earlier Jesus told Zacchaeus, "I must come to your house today." Now he says, "Today salvation has come to this house." The presence of Jesus is

salvation—for Zacchaeus and for all who will welcome Jesus. Salvation for Zacchaeus meant deliverance from greed, but also restoration to the community of God’s people. He is a true child of Abraham, not because of bloodline, but because of relating to Jesus. To be a descendant of Abraham was to be a true Jew, a true child of God. By including Zacchaeus in Abraham’s family, Jesus shows that he is acceptable.

Jesus shows that Zacchaeus is accepted by going to his home. As a guest in Zacchaeus’ home, Jesus would eat with him. Eating together in that culture is a sign of peace, trust, family ties, forgiveness and commitment. What one ate and with whom one ate was part of what made Jews distinctive in a pagan culture. The shared table symbolizes a shared life. That’s why the Jews only ate with others who were religiously and socially clean and acceptable. And that’s why Jesus often ate with anyone, clean or unclean, Pharisee or tax collector, acceptable or unacceptable. We’re going to eat together with Jesus in a few minutes.

Brennan Manning writes,

Nowhere in the New Testament is the privileged position of turkeys, nobodies and marginal people on the fringes of society disclosed more dramatically than in Jesus’ ministry of meal sharing. ...For an orthodox Jew to say, “I would like to have dinner with you,” is a metaphor implying, “I would like to enter into friendship with you.” ...“Come to the miniature sanctuary of my dining room table where we will celebrate the most sacred and beautiful experience that life affords—friendship.” That is what Zacchaeus heard when Jesus called him down from the sycamore tree, and that is why Jesus’ practice of table fellowship caused hostile comment.... [Jesus] was not only breaking the law, he was destroying the very structure of Jewish society. But Zacchaeus, not too hung up on respectability, was overwhelmed with joy. ...The inclusion of sinners in the community of salvation, symbolized in table fellowship, is the most dramatic expression of the ragamuffin gospel and merciful love of the redeeming God (*The Ragamuffin Gospel*, 57, 58, 59).

Jesus is the real "seeker" in this story. He came looking for the lost so he could save them. If we are followers of Jesus, if we have salvation and life in him, it's because he sought us. We found him because he was looking for us.

Bob Stamps wrote a Communion hymn about God in Christ seeking and sitting at the table with all kinds of people.

O, welcome all ye noble saints of old
as now before your very eyes unfold
the wonders all so long ago foretold
God with all at table is sat down

Elders, martyrs, all are falling down
prophets, patriarchs are gathering 'round
what angels longed to see now we have found
God with all at table is sat down

Beggars, lame, and harlots also here
Repentant publicans are drawing near
Wayward sons come home without a fear
God with all at table is sat down

Who is this who spreads the victory feast?
Who is this who makes our warring cease?
Jesus, Risen Savior, Prince of Peace
God with all at table is sat down

Here he gives himself to us as bread
Here, as wine, we drink the blood he shed
Born to die, we eat and live instead
God with all at table is sat down

Worship in the presence of the Lord
with joyful songs and hearts in one accord

and let our Host at table be adored
God with all at table is sat down

When at last this earth shall pass away
when Jesus and His bride are one to stay
the feast of love is just begun that day
God with all at table is sat down

(Robert J. Stamps, 1972)

Zacchaeus was changed by his encounter with Jesus. There's no indication that he quit being a tax collector, but he became very generous—giving away half of everything he had to the poor. He quit cheating people and paid back anyone he may have cheated. He became a new person, living in God's grace in his old circumstances.

When we receive Jesus and find grace and salvation in him, we are called to live in God's grace and have a positive influence right where we are. Nothing in our lives is left untouched by the salvation that comes when Jesus comes to us and we receive him gladly.

Now, as followers of Jesus, we go with him as he seeks the lost. He continues seeking through us. That means going to people with the presence of Jesus in the Holy Spirit and with the good news that salvation is here today. As people respond to Jesus' seeking them, they may become seekers and come hoping to find him in the church. Are we ready to go to them? Are we ready to welcome and receive them in the spirit of Jesus who is always seeking and saving the lost?