Wee Little Man

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 19:1-10

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For any of you who grew up going to church, this Zacchaeus story is likely to be familiar. My Sunday school teacher, Miss Buckholtz, God rest her soul, worked valiantly to teach us this story and the song that accompanied it: “Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he. He climbed up into a sycamore tree. For the Lord he wanted to see.” There’s more to the song, but you get the drift. This song is a golden oldie of Sunday school lore.

Let me forewarn you. This Zacchaeus story is not merely for children; it’s for adults also. It has everything to do with infatuation with money and relational meltdown.

We’re told three things about Zacchaeus at the outset of this story. First, we learn that “Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector” (Luke 19:2).

Tax collectors were reviled in first century Israel. The Hebrew people were subject to the mighty Roman Empire. The Romans hired Jews to collect taxes from fellow Jews, all sorts of taxes: land taxes, road taxes, sales and head taxes. Any Jew who conspired with the Roman government to collect taxes was considered a traitor.

Zacchaeus is not only a tax collector but a chief tax collector. He supervises a group of tax collectors in a Roman tax district. It shows how deeply Zacchaeus is in collusion with the Roman government.

The second thing we’re told about Zacchaeus is that he’s wealthy. “Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector and was wealthy” (Luke 19:2). Tax collectors contracted with the Roman government to raise a specified tax amount. Anything above this base amount was theirs to keep. They could charge any amount of surcharge they could get away with collecting. Tax collectors practiced a legalized form of extortion. No wonder they were despised.

The third thing we learn about Zacchaeus is that he’s a small man. We read in the third verse, “He wanted to see Jesus, but he was a short man.” I imagine him to resemble Danny DeVito somehow. You know, short in stature and larger than life.

Zacchaeus learns that Jesus is coming to town. Since Zacchaeus can’t see over a crowd, he climbs a sycamore tree to get a better view.

Wouldn’t you know it! Jesus passes under the very tree where Zacchaeus is sitting. Jesus looks up, sees this grown man up in the tree and
identifies him by name. “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”

What does Jesus mean, “I must stay at your house today.”? “Must” in the Greek is a word that communicates divine necessity. It’s not coincidental that Jesus passes under that tree at the precise moment Zacchaeus is poised to follow him. This story has God’s providence written all over it.

It’s undignified for a wealthy man to climb a tree. But people do lots of things when they are desperate. Zacchaeus is desperate to see Jesus and Jesus knows it.

Zacchaeus has undoubtedly heard the rumor that Jesus is a friend of tax collectors and sinners (Luke 7:34). His wealth has brought him little satisfaction. Making money the corrupt way only adds to his misery. Zacchaeus jumps at the chance to entertain his unexpected dinner guest. You want to stay at my house? My house!

The people watching this drama play out grumble under their breaths, “Jesus has gone to be a guest of one who is a sinner” (19:7). There are two other places in Luke’s gospel where people grumble about the company Jesus keeps. The Pharisees grumble when Jesus invites Levi (also called Matthew) to join his ranks as one of the 12 apostles (Luke 5:27). What makes this invitation so scandalous is that Levi, like Zacchaeus, is also a tax collector.

The other reference to grumbling occurs in the story that served as the basis of last Sunday’s sermon. While Jesus dines with tax collectors, Luke reports that, “The Pharisees and teachers of the law grumbled, ‘This man welcomes sinners and eats with them’” (Luke 15:2). It’s the story that gives rise to the Parable of the Prodigal Son.

People who grumble in Luke’s gospel are always complaining about the same thing. They grumble about Jesus’ generosity toward sinners.

Religious people like us can lose sight of the fact that Jesus came to save sinners. We can focus so much about our virtue that it blinds us to our need for God.

In his book, *Ragamuffin Gospel*, Brennan Manning tells the story of a man who had committed a serious sin. His church excommunicated him. They wouldn’t allow him to ever step foot in the church again. The man expressed his apology to church leaders and sought restitution but still they refused to
let him back in. The man took his woes to God. “Lord, they won’t let me in because I’m a sinner.” To which the Lord replied, “What are you complaining about?” the Lord said. “They won’t let me in either.”

This tongue-in-cheek story finds its mark. As the title suggests, we are all ragamuffins when it comes to faith. It’s just that some of us have nicer clothes than others. This book is written by a Catholic priest, now deceased, who struggled with alcoholism and, sometimes, was barely able to hold his faith together.

Notice how our story closes, “Jesus came to seek and to save the lost” (19:10). Jesus doesn’t merely pat religious people on the back. He doesn’t come to hang out with the rich and famous. He comes to seek and to save the lost!

We’re not privy to what Jesus and Zacchaeus talked about that day. Wouldn’t you love to have been a fly on the wall? But this much is certain, Zacchaeus emerged from their conversation a changed man.

There are two evidences of transformation in Zacchaeus’ life. The first evidence of transformation is his change from greed to generosity.

Old Testament law specified that if a believer defrauded someone, he is liable “to pay the offended party back the full amount plus 20 percent” (Numbers 5:7). If the crime involves outright robbery, the pay back number jumps to four times the original theft. “If a man steals an ox or a sheep, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep” (Exodus 22:1). In other words, Zacchaeus offers to pay people back by the highest amount allowed by law.

Zacchaeus has made an idol out of money. In this moment, he surrenders his idol to Jesus. He pays his debtors back four times over. He shows generosity in spades.

Where do you need to practice generosity? One of the best ways I know to disarm the power of money is give some of it away. The Bible identifies a benchmark of ten percent called the tithe, as an appropriate gift to give to the Lord’s work.

There are no dues to pay in this church. We don’t bill people for our religious services. We rely on people’s generosity to do the Lord’s work here. If you believe we are faithfully doing the Lord’s work and exercising fiscal responsibility in doing so, it’s appropriate for you to support the Lord’s work through this church.
The second transformation in Zacchaeus’ life is the change from relational rift to restitution. Generosity becomes the catalyst for Zacchaeus to make full restitution with people he has wronged. Zacchaeus shows us how serious he is about making things right again with people by going well beyond the requirements of the law.

What do you need to do to make amends with people you have wronged? Matthew, the afore-mentioned tax collector, writes in his gospel, “If someone sins against you, go and point out the fault, just between the two of you” (18:15).

Don’t wait by the phone for the other person to make the first move. Take the first step. Go directly to the person you believe has wronged you. Don’t go around the barn and involve other people. Go directly to the offending party.

Never underestimate the cost of holding onto a relational rift with someone. There is a heavy price to bear for refusing to let go of anger and bitterness. Go to the person. Go now. Go alone. Go to reconcile the relationship.

I have four options for your consideration regarding today’s passage. I invite you to pick one or more for homework this week.

First, you may be in a Zacchaeus’ moment and need to say yes to Jesus’ offer of salvation. Jesus may be saying to you today through this sermon, “I must stay at your house today.” If Zacchaeus is worthy of Jesus’ love, there’s hope for you also.

The second and third options have already been discussed. Practice generosity with this church or reconcile with someone who is coming to mind right now.

The fourth option is to tell someone about Jesus. Someone in your circle of family and friends may be at a Zacchaeus moment in their lives. We’re highlighting this summer in our daily devotional telling other people about Jesus. Other people may be at a pivotal spiritual moment and you have been called upon to be Christ’s messenger.

I asked in the children’s section of our bulletin about the one word that repeats in our Scripture lesson. It’s the word “today.” Jesus says to Zacchaeus, “I must stay at your house today” (19:5). Later, when
Zacchaeus begins to practice generosity and seek restitution, Jesus declares, “Today, salvation has come to your house” (19:9).

There’s no day like today. Today, do you need to say yes to Jesus’ offer of salvation? Today, do you need to practice generosity? Today, do you need to be reconciled with someone? Today, do you need to tell someone about Jesus?

You may be thinking, can’t we just put this stuff off until fall? After all, it’s summer and I’m in vacation-mode. No, today is the day. What do you need to do today? Today, salvation can come to your house. Today!