

Sermon for Proper 26C
Sunday, October 30, 2022
“Do you see me?”

Text: Luke 19:1-10

I speak to you in the name of the one true God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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 as the Savior passed that way,
He looked up in the tree,
And he said, “Zacchaeus, you come down!
For I’m going to your house today,
For I’m going to your house today.”

Zacchaeus may have been short in stature, but he was tall in hope. Zacchaeus was a man who in many ways didn’t measure up to society’s standards, but his persistence and his refusal to give up proved his worthiness as a person. His story in today’s Gospel lesson, though short, it is full of lessons for life. Let’s pick apart this story and discover why it is so profound.

Jesus was entering Jericho. Jericho is a city located in the West Bank, Palestinian territory, about 15 miles east of Jerusalem and is one of the oldest known cities in the world. Jesus’s journey to Jericho was full of meaningful encounters and insightful parables described in the previous chapter of Luke’s gospel. When confronted by the Pharisees to explain what he meant when he referred to the “kingdom of God,” Jesus told them that it was all around them, then offered a few parables, like the Parable of the Widow and the Unjust Judge in which he advised them and his disciples not to lose heart—to be persistent in their prayers and in their belief in God’s faithfulness. He taught them a lesson in humility, like the lesson from last week’s Gospel passage in which he praised a tax collector who simply asked for God’s mercy and chided the Pharisee who boasted of his piety but was indifferent to his own sinfulness and dependence on God’s mercy. Jesus met a certain ruler who asked him how he could inherit eternal life, and Jesus told him that empty piety and mere adherence to the commandments was useless if he didn’t allow his piety and devotion to show charity to others. “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.” And, as he approached Jericho, Jesus met a blind man—someone rejected by his own people who boasted of their piety—who simply implored, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy upon me, a sinner.” “Immediately he regained his sight and followed [Jesus], glorifying God.”

Finally, Jesus entered Jericho, and as he was entering, the Scripture tells us, there was a man named Zaccaeus. Now Zacchaeus was small in stature. Here was an adult man who was shorter than most other people in his community. Back then, people were generally shorter than people today, so Zacchaeus was *really* short! He spent his life always looking up to other people, and others looked down on him physically. He was also a chief tax collector, which meant that he was despised by his own Jewish people for being an agent for the Romans who were occupying their land and oppressing their people; thus, he was looked down upon socially, as well as physically. But, by his being a rich tax collector, he compensated for his short stature and he enjoyed elevated economic status, at the expense of acceptance in his religious community. A crowd had formed to see Jesus as he entered the city, so Zacchaeus climbed up a sycamore tree so that he could be above everyone else as Jesus passed. As Jesus passed, he noticed Zacchaeus in the tree, and here's where Jesus turned this chance encounter into a teaching opportunity; he drew his attention to Zacchaeus, causing himself and everyone else to look up and see the man—a tax collector—whom society looked down upon and his religious community ignored. If you think about other stories and parables of Jesus, he often uses persons marginalized by the society, like tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, and other “lost” ones, as the heroes and exemplars of the point he is trying to make. Jesus asked him to come down and be among those who rejected him, and then he said he was going to his house for dinner, which ticked off the prominent people watching. Zacchaeus was doubly marginalized by being shorter than everyone and by being a tax collector, but Jesus welcomed him as a child of God and acknowledged his being part of the Jewish community by calling him a son of Abraham. And the story ends there.

This story has an important three notable lessons for us. First, is what we've been hearing for the last several weeks: like Zacchaeus in his persistence, never to give up in our quest to see God and be closer to him. We must keep praying, believing, and trying. We can't give up when God's timing differs from our expectations; we have to let God work it out for us—and he will—and we just have to maintain our confidence in his faithfulness. The second message for us is that we must not fall into society's trap of looking down on others, especially those less fortunate than we, the disabled, those whom society condemns, those whose political views might differ from our own. We must be like Jesus and speak up on their behalf and call out injustice, inequity, prejudice, fear, and bad behavior. We must not be afraid to share the good news of Jesus Christ with the world, and not just keep it to the circles we hang out in at church.

The following paragraph was not preached live on Sunday, but has been added upon further reflection:

The other lesson that I think Zacchaeus' story teaches us is that it's ok to have privilege, because there's work in God's economy for the privileged and the powerful. It is unquestionably common for those of us who preach the good news of Christ to

talk about defending the poor, empowering the disenfranchised, and loving the lost. Indeed, the ministry of Jesus and so much of the Bible is devoted to casting down the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. But the rich and powerful can contribute greatly to the advancement of God's kingdom. Some years ago, while I was a young assistant priest at a large parish with lots of money, I went on a pilgrimage with them to Honduras. We were there for a week to help build a building for school that whose mission was to educate disadvantaged kids, and they were doing great work. For a week we moved and patted down dirt, built some walls, and several other tasks that we were asked to do. But I also noticed there were a number of locals helping us and I realized that I'm there for only a week and then they have to train another group to do the same thing. I'd rather be getting to know the people and culture than moving dirt. Instead, we could use our privilege of having money and connections to give more jobs to the locals who are going to be there long term and will be able to get the building built probably faster and more efficiently. And we could use our connections to get experienced architects and engineers to volunteer their time. When Jesus acknowledged Zacchaeus' worth, he was inspired to give to the poor, return anything he defrauded others out of, and rectify any wrongs he had done. The privileged classes, cultures, and races of our day are called to use their power and privilege—also gifts from God—to empower those who have less, so that we are all enjoying the riches of God's creation and working together to make our society and planet a healthier and more equitable place to exist.

The story of Zacchaeus and Jesus teaches us that we must always see each other, love, and respect each other as children of God regardless of who they might be, so that at the end of the day, a glimpse of God's glorious kingdom can be realized here and now. Amen.

Resources

<https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-31-3/commentary-on-luke-191-10-5>

https://www.episcopalchurch.org/bible_study/bible-study-pentecost-21-c-october-30-2022/