

## **Climb a Tree to Host the Savior**

Rev. Thomas A. Orquiza-Renardo

This story in the Bible, of Zacchaeus in the tree... well, it's just a fun story. I mean, Zacchaeus is my people, not because he's a tax collector. He's my people because he is not afraid to climb a tree.

How many of you like to climb trees? Whether it was something you did as a kid, or something you're still doing today, or something you really shouldn't be doing but you're still doing it anyway (I know we got a few of you with us today). But seriously, how many of you like to climb trees? I know you're out there. Climbing trees is fun. We climbers all have a bit of Zacchaeus in us. We're not afraid to get a bit higher to see all we can see just like Zacchaeus did. What's interesting is what got him to climb that tree to begin with.

Here's this Jesus guy coming through town, and Zacchaeus is the farthest thing from being righteous. I mean he's a chief tax collector. That means, by the standards of the Jewish culture at that time, he's basically a trader. He's collecting money for Caesar and for the Roman Empire. He's also probably taxing folks harshly because he only has to pay to Rome what Rome asks for. Anything he collects beyond that is his. Which means there's most likely some overcharging going on there.

Another layer to what's going on under the surface of this story is Zacchaeus' motivation in why he might be overcharging. As a tax collector he would be shunned by the people. There might be some vengeance going on there, "You all are gonna make me an outcast? Fine, you all are gonna owe more than they say you owe. I'm gonna be livin' the high life while you all figure out how you're gonna get by."

Then he hears that Jesus is coming to town, and his curiosity is peaked. Jesus seemed to do that, he sparked people's curiosity. Herod's curiosity was sparked by Jesus. It was also sparked by John the Baptist. Herod liked listening to them. He enjoyed how they spoke, how dynamic they were, full of righteousness and power and divine lessons. That didn't *change* anything for Herod. He was still a terrible king. For Zacchaeus though, something more was drawing him to this moment in the tree. There was an interest and a curiosity he needed to satisfy. So, he decided, "Ok, I'll go out and see this man Jesus. Who is he? What's he saying that's got his name spreading throughout Judea? Why is he sparking such controversy with some people against him and so many for him? Why does a crowd gather around him wherever he goes?"

So, Zacchaeus goes out, and there's such a huge crowd that Zacchaeus can't see this man Jesus who he'd come out to see. (And this is where translations of scripture can be fun.) Here, this is where we're taught that Zacchaeus is the short person in the story. Depending on how you translate it, Jesus might have been the short person at the center of the crowd; the tiny little savior-man in the middle of all these taller people... or, here's this tiny little tax collector who decides he's gonna get the advantage of height in the branches of a sycamore tree. Either way Zacchaeus climbs into that tree to see this Jesus, to try and hear what he's saying, to see if he can figure out why this Jesus is so different and so compelling to the crowds.

Little did Zacchaeus know that in climbing that tree, in showing that curiosity, in taking some level of initiative, he was going to be called upon. At this point Zacchaeus is like a college student in the very back row of a lecture hall. He's sitting back there thinking he won't be noticed in the sea of faces. He's listening, perhaps thinking he might have some idea of what Professor Jesus might be teaching or talking about. But then Jesus turns his gaze about and their eyes lock. We've been in that spot in school where you start to panic and pray the teacher won't call on you. Then your fate is sealed when the teacher calls out your name. Jesus saw this curious tax collector and that's just what he did. "Zacchaeus... Come down out of that tree. I'm staying at your house today."

Another question for you. How many of us, in that moment, if Jesus invited himself over to our house, would be ready to receive him. Now, I'm not looking for the faithful automatic Christian answer of, "Oh yeah, he can come over anytime he wants." That's a lie. That's what the preacher wants to hear. But how many of us, in that moment, would say, "Yeah, sure, come on over!" Or how many of us would be asking, "What skeletons do I need to hide in my closet? What state is my house in? Do I have any food for a guest what-so-ever?" How many of us would be *that* person? I know I would be. That's where Zacchaeus was in that moment when Jesus said, "I'm coming to your house, Zacchaeus. I'm staying with you and having dinner at your place today."

There's probably a bunch of things going through Zacchaeus' head. One was probably that list of questions I just gave. Another might be the question of why. "Why on earth would Jesus be wanting to come to my house?" Zacchaeus is probably asking. "I'm despised by the people. I'm an outcast from my neighbors. Why does he want to come to my house? I mean this is Jesus. He's this person who's been teaching love and holy living, and how to follow the commandments in a new way, and God before all else with the whole 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, your mind, your soul, and your strength. And this Jesus, who seems to know people simply by looking at them... I didn't tell him my name! He knows that I am a sinner. Why my house?"

Let me ask you this question. (I seem to have a lot for you today.) Did Jesus pick out Zacchaeus because he knew Zacchaeus was gonna be there, or did Jesus pick out Zacchaeus because Zacchaeus showed some initiative, some effort to see and learn more, some amount of curiosity and wanting. It wasn't a wanting for more wealth as from the money he extorted in his profession. It was a deeper, more spiritual wanting. Did Jesus see in Zacchaeus something more? Could Jesus see in Zacchaeus an opening where he could say, "This heart is ready?"

Does Jesus look at us, whether we're climbing a tree or we're there in the first row of the crowd... Does Jesus look at us and reach out to us because Jesus sees in us some level of wanting? Some level of needing to be healed or heard or understood or loved? Remember we shouldn't be reading scripture as people who can relate to the holy and righteous in the story. No, we never read scripture like that. When we read scripture, we need to put ourselves in the place of the people to whom Jesus is preaching. In this story, we put ourselves in the place of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is wanting, needing something from Jesus whether he knows it or not. Zacchaeus' home and heart are about to be reformed.

We come to church this Sunday in that idea of reform. That idea of change and transformation. That idea of shifting from one way of thinking and practicing and being to another way, a different priority, another enlightened understanding.

This is Reformation Sunday. It's a day we remember the German monk Martin Luther going up to the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany to nail his 95 Theses to the door. Sometimes we hear that in 21<sup>st</sup> Century culture and we see Martin Luther as such a rebel going up to the door and using that hammer to secure his work with attitude and righteous resolve. There might've been some of that rebel spirit and righteous resolve. Honestly though, that's simply how you turned work in to be reviewed in that day. It was really more of an, "I've been working on this. I think I found some problems and I have some concerns. Here, I want you to take a look at this and think about it."

Well... the Church didn't like what Luther had to say. The Church for a long time prior to Martin Luther's day had kept the scriptures basically to itself. There were a lot of suspect things that came out of the totality of scripture being unavailable to the common people and being kept "secret" in a way. These practices were not scripture based; practices of excess and corruption, most notably the practice of indulgences where one could *pay* to have their sins forgiven. There were also practices that gave clergy excessive authority. For example, I've never seen it anywhere in scripture where people are commanded to humble themselves and submit before the bishop and kiss their ring. I'm pretty sure if you tried to kiss our bishop's ring, Bishop Elaine, she'd swat you away and ask you what on earth you were doing.

Excess wealth and worldly power and the right of divine extortion are not privileges given to the Church in any way, shape, or form by scripture. The Church is meant to be humble and holy. So, Martin Luther went through the scripture and said, "No, we need to go back to scripture. We need to reform the way that we're doing this." He wasn't trying to start a new movement. He was just trying to say, "Hey, we need to get back to our priorities: Loving the needy, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, giving medicine to the sick, caring for all God's children. Let's get back to those holy practices."

When Spirit moves and Jesus comes into our lives, it is a call to go back to these holy practices and these spiritually humanitarian priorities. It is a call to go back and be loving, be charitable, be the people of God informed by the love of God, carrying out the work of salvation, reforming how we live, and transforming who we are.

Zacchaeus' house was reformed. We go back to our scripture, into those moments recorded in Luke, and we don't know what Jesus said. All we know is the people were looking at him like, "What are you doing? Where are you going? That's a sinner. Why are you going to eat with him?" What we *can* know with some certainty though, is something profound happened during that visit. Something profound happened in Zacchaeus' home. Because Zacchaeus came out with this explosion of generosity and gratitude. The scripture says Zacchaeus proclaimed his change of ways. He made a plan to change how he lived. He said, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount (Luke 19:8, NIV). Cause Lord, what you have taught me, what you have shown me, is a better way."

For an outcast to receive Jesus, in that moment, right there, is a solid example of how God wants us to love. It's not about labels. It's not about power. It's not about right or wrong. It is about God loving everyone. Jesus goes to all of the places that scare us. The thing is, Jesus goes to those places, turns around and looks at us, and asks, "Are you coming?" Cause there's a number of people in those places that need to know what it is to be loved and heard, understood and accepted. When you get into the heart of scripture, like Martin Luther was trying to do – like Martin Luther did do – it's about love. The heart of scripture is about love. It's about charity. It's about living and working in ways that mend society.

A lot of people like to quote the Old Testament in ways that say divide, separate, exclude, eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth. They like to go to places like Leviticus 18 to ground their hate in a misguided sense of divine superiority. Throw Leviticus 18 away. It's a mistranslation. Period. Division, exclusion, and hate are not Biblical values when you look at how the ultimate salvific work of God culminates in a crucified Messiah.

The underlying message of the Prophets is, take care of each other. Take care of the widow. Take care of the orphan. Welcome... welcome... welcome the foreigner and the immigrant. Even Paul teaches, "Look, I know there are outcasts in your midst. But if you reach out to them in love, they can become your most valuable siblings and workers in terms of building a faithful community." Because they know what it is to hurt. And when the hurt is turned around, they know the value of radical love and acceptance."

By the grace of God, by the faith of God's people, by the hope in Jesus Christ, let us remember that when Christ comes in, generosity and gratitude needs to pour out. That is how we know God's people. When Christ goes in, generosity and gratitude pour out. Love pours out. Let us all receive Christ again, and again, and again in these days.

In Jesus' everlasting name, Amen.