

Luke 19:1-10

Man Out On a Limb

Zacchaeus, a chief tax collector, rich, and despised. He cheated people. He was part of the bureaucracy and power that took what little many people had and lined their own pockets without guilt or remorse. When it says he was small in stature, it may be referring to what most of us from our Sunday school lessons were led to believe, that Zacchaeus was short. The word used for small in stature can also mean that Zacchaeus was small in the eyes of the world. He was scum.

Who would be that person in your own life? Is it a boss, a company that you work for, or others in your life that have taken advantage of you and what you have to offer. Sometimes it may be hard to think of those who take advantage of others as someone that might be despised by others. Our culture's love of money and power often idolizes those who have much like an Elon Musk or Jeff Bazos. They are revered rather than despised.

There are politicians, musicians, actors, leaders, and entrepreneurs who catch our attention because they have become famous in their field. We hold them up as a measure of success without considering whether or not they are examples of how to live one's life in and with the knowledge of others who are less fortunate. Others who may be suffering because of the love of money, power, and prestige of one person or a group of people. The rich, famous, and powerful are held up as icons and idols due to society's desires for such things.

And please do not misunderstand, this is not about bashing those who have been successful. If we think about Zacchaeus, Jesus did not ask him to give up his wealth, to change his job, but rather it was about justice, fairness, kindness, and transformation. Even John the Baptist told the tax collectors in Luke 3:13, after they came to be baptized and asked him, "Teacher, what should we do? He said to them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." This was not about Zacchaeus work; this was about his life.

It might be interesting for you to take a moment to hear the story again and see where you find yourself. Do you identify with Zacchaeus, with Jesus, or with the crowd. Let's try that. Listen again, this time using words from The Message. Place yourself in the story.

Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. ² There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. ³ He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way - he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. ⁴ So he

ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by. ⁵ When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home." ⁶ Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. ⁷ Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, "What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?" ⁸ Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, "Master, I give away half my income to the poor - and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages." ⁹ Jesus said, "Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost."¹

Now that you have listened it again, where did you find yourself? It may have been easy to find yourself identifying with the crowd. Oh, how we like to judge others. Everyone of us is good at that, even if we don't actually speak our judgement out loud to another. We think that God has got to have standards. You can't just accept anyone into the fold or the family or where would the church be?

But this story demonstrates that God's thoughts are not our thoughts. Who is in and who is out just doesn't jive with God's love for all. Everyone is welcome in God's kingdom; everyone is supposed to be welcome in our churches. Often, we fall short in our welcome. We like to think we are welcoming people, welcoming congregations, but how often do people feel the sting of our judgement or wonder as we stare or glare at them because they just don't get that there is a standard of behaviour and decorum expected. I say this knowing that we are imperfect people and not all relationships work out, in the church and outside of the church, but there should be an effort to welcome and to love.

One may not think they are judgemental or even on the extreme, racist, but it may be interesting to examine your thoughts. What do you think when you see a homeless person approach you? And in the community of Thunder Bay, what if that someone is also indigenous? How about the person that you believe thinks too highly of themselves or you know to be a cheat, a player, or just mean...what are your thoughts then? Do you believe God has room for them, is willing to see further than you see?

Every person walking the face of the earth is a son or daughter of Abraham. We all have a place in God's kingdom here on earth and in heaven.

Maybe you identify more with Zacchaeus. You feel on the margins, not accepted, not seen as someone with value. Maybe you have done things that you think God could never forgive or believe that you are not worthy of the love and forgiveness that is offered to every person, regardless of what you bring. Know, as it was for Zacchaeus, you are seen, you are heard, you are worthy to be with. Just as Jesus dined and stayed

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at the house of Zacchaeus, ignoring the grumblings of the crowd who snidely remarked, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." (v7)

Newsflash, we are all sinners. Not one of us sitting here today is immune to sin, of failing ourselves, others, and God miserably. I think of the joy, the love, the acceptance, and maybe even relief that Zacchaeus experienced knowing that this man Jesus, cared enough, was able to see past all the inequity and come and be with Zacchaeus.

Jesus is that person for each and everyone of us. Jesus came to show us the extent of God's love. Jesus may not have asked anything of Zacchaeus, but we are not likely to stay the same when we experience Jesus in scripture, in others, in the work of the Holy Spirit. At least not when we are looking for it, just as Zacchaeus went out on a limb in order to see Jesus.

And let me add, that for a grown man with Zacchaeus' reputation to make a mockery of himself by climbing the tree to see Jesus, whether it was because he was short or because the crowd wouldn't let him get close, well, that says a lot. Zacchaeus may not have wanted to draw attention to himself, he likely didn't even think that Jesus would pay attention to him, but as Zacchaeus was looking for Jesus and Jesus was looking for the lost. He understood Zacchaeus to be lost. You may be looking for Jesus, trying to understand this and other stories from scripture. You may be wondering why you haven't felt Jesus with you or that anything in your life has changed, but know that Jesus is looking for you. God is seeking you out. Saving the lost. So, if you are feeling lost, hopeless, overwhelmed, angry, or whatever it is for you, God is searching for you. Maybe you need to go out on a limb and look.

This story has many questions that could be asked, details that are left out, but regardless the purpose of the story remains. We are to come away knowing that "the Son of Man [Jesus] came to seek out and save the lost."

Each of us feels lost at times. You and I are included in this story, so are those who are despised, those we judge and think unworthy. God doesn't distinguish between your need and that of another. All are sought out, all are lost, all can be saved in and through God's grace and love.

Go out on a limb to see God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit at work in your life and that of others. God out on a limb to be the light of Christ in the lives of others. It may be that you are the one God is using so that others will see Jesus and experience the gift of being seen, welcomed, and loved.

We do it all, we live it all, in the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. Amen.