

**Come Down From That Tree**  
**October 31, 2010**  
**Luke 19:1 – 10**

**The Word of God for the people of God.**

<sup>1</sup>Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup>A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. <sup>3</sup>He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. <sup>4</sup>So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

<sup>5</sup>When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." <sup>6</sup>So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

<sup>7</sup>All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.' "

<sup>8</sup>But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "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."

<sup>9</sup>Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

**This is the Word of God and It can be trusted.**

Let us pray:

*Almighty and merciful God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and creditable service: Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises just as Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd to gain the promises offered to him; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives, and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.*

*Special thanks to Reverend William G. Wilson  
First Baptist Church of Dalton  
<http://day1.org/813-changed-from-a-taker-to-a-giver>*

The story of Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus is one of the best-known Biblical texts from the New Testament and the very mention of his name, Zacchaeus, evokes a grin from most of us as we remember the childhood story of a *wee little man* who climbed a tree to see Jesus. It is a story that speaks to our humanity; a short man scrambling up a tree to see Jesus. Many of us have known the burden of being too short to see over others at some point in our life (well, maybe not Bobby), but many of us have; especially when a crowd is involved; during a parade or at some concert or rally, and so we identify with those words in verse 3: "He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd". We think of Zacchaeus and we smile because we see a glimpse of our own inadequacies overcome as we seek to know Christ.

While this story is familiar and sparks childhood nostalgia within each of us, let me challenge those feelings today and suggest that this is more than just a story from our youth. It is one of the most powerful and provocative stories in all of scripture. It introduces the very radical notion that God will stop at nothing less than the total transformation of who we are.

Like the one who was justified before God in last week's reading (Luke 18:9 – 14), Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Not just any tax collector mind you, he was the chief tax collector for the Roman government in this prospering city of Jericho. Because of his occupation only, he was, very possibly, the most hated man in Jericho. He worked for the occupying forces, and he was regarded as a traitor to his own people. He and his cohorts could stop a person in Jericho and assess duties on nearly everything in his or her possession. A cart, for instance, could be taxed for each wheel, for the animal that pulled it, and for the merchandise that it carried.

Like many of the tax collectors of the day, he would send in a portion of his collections, and anything over that amount he was free to keep. The system was ripe for abuse, and as

today's reading states: "he was wealthy" (v. 2); as if that were some kind of condemnation . . . and it was.

He had accumulated his wealth at the expense of his countrymen, and he was regarded as human filth. Zacchaeus, whose very name meant "the pure one" and "the righteous," had turned his name into a sneer on the lips of his fellow Jews. He was a standing joke. The mention of his name evoked not a grin but disgust.

Now the money was nice, to be sure. But to live as an outcast among your own people, with no one to call a friend . . . no social life . . . no involvement with others except those who wanted to use you for their own ends. It had to be a lonely and depressing existence.

Then along comes Jesus. The word is out that this Messiah is different. Recall again from last week's reading (Luke 18:9 -14) that it is the tax collector who is the hero and the Pharisee who is the foil. The Jesus that had come to town had a reputation that preceded him; Jesus is comfortable with those who living on the margins of society; children, women, and even tax collectors have come to find in him a listening ear and a warm reception. Zacchaeus wouldn't have known fully what to expect, but Zacchaeus knew Jesus was worth checking out.

For Zacchaeus, this would have been easier said than done. Zacchaeus was short, and seeing over or through a crowd was a real chore. His only hope was to skirt ahead of the crowd and find a sycamore tree that would afforded a ringside view of Jesus as he passed by and so our reading tells us this is exactly what Zacchaeus did. He waited there in that tree, with probably no real idea of what to expect, as Jesus came into view.

And then, the most amazing and most unexpected thing that could possibly happen happened . . . Jesus stopped and looked up at him. (v. 5) Jesus had eyes that saw what others missed. This uncanny vision allowed him to see into people and into situations that anyone else

would have missed. But he didn't miss Zacchaeus. Luke says Jesus saw him and said simply, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." (v. 5)

Zacchaeus wasted no time scrambling down from that tree, and he "welcomed him gladly." I suppose Zacchaeus could have stayed up in that tree and refused Jesus' invitation. Hasn't it been our experience that many people do? It is certainly much easier to go on with our lives and to continue with our own preoccupations, our own worldly agendas than to allow a Messiah to invite himself over for lunch and delve into our very being. We all know that it's risky business to allow anyone, let alone this man called Jesus, into that part of us where our true self resides. Most of us can resist and many do. But Zacchaeus takes the chance and invites Jesus into not only his home, but into his life. Certainly it would have been a lunch to remember.

The kind of risk that Zacchaeus had started to take would have been rewarding, but what about the onlookers that surrounded him? The turn of events would have been hard for the townsfolk to swallow. What kind of so-called Messiah would even acknowledge, much less eat with the most notorious sinner in town? Luke says they began to "murmur," that is they began to "mutter." Surely this wasn't the way it was suppose to be.

We aren't given the details as to what exactly happens between Jesus and Zacchaeus. I like that. If we were given the details of the conversation that took place or the interaction that occurred, we may be tempted to concentrate on that rather than the results. So much of what we have come to know as modern Christianity is built on ritual and tradition, possibly the result of focusing on the wrong thing; that is the action that leads to change rather than the personal decision that leads to it. Zacchaeus had made a personal decision to turn his life over to Christ, to take a risk on this man name Jesus and the results we nothing less than miraculous. Based on his new found faith in Christ, Zacchaeus makes a two-part pledge: to give half his yearly income

to the poor and to return any stolen funds four times over. Jewish law only required restitution of the money plus twenty percent but Zacchaeus thought four hundred percent interest was more appropriate.

Something in that encounter with Jesus changed the way Zacchaeus saw the world. He now saw others as people with needs rather than an opportunity to fill his own pockets. Is this what so many of us are afraid of? To have our hearts and our eyes changed to see those around us as equal; equal in value, as well as equal in need? Jesus changes how we see other people. Labels are no longer appropriate; poor, rich, Democrat, Republican, white, black, gay, straight; as a result of the change Christ makes within each of us we now we see people who are as needy as we are. Scary isn't it? Now we see real people with real needs. We see glimpses of this when disasters occur. Let a hurricane blow through or a tornado touch down or a plane fall from the sky and people rally to the support of their neighbors without any concern for their social status or skin color; but our ability to see clearly should not stop there. To be changed in Christ is to see with the eyes of Jesus and Jesus sees no labels.

Salvation comes to Zacchaeus' house, and he is forever changed from a taker to a giver. This man had made his living taking from others, and suddenly, after one meal with Jesus, he is giving money away like he's the United Way of Jericho. When Christ takes up residence in a life, we become generous. Somehow he loosens our grip on our wallet, our pocketbook, our credit card. Giving becomes an opportunity, not just a requirement. As a result of that encounter with Jesus, for Zacchaeus, a 50% tithe seemed an appropriate response. You and I are invited to decide for ourselves what our response will be.

Paul Scherer, in describing this story, says that this meeting with Jesus "redeemed Zacchaeus' past, it transformed his present, and it re-directed his future." Isn't that what God

wants to do with all of us? Our reading today is a story of the power God's mercy and grace to genuinely change a human being. We cannot call ourselves Christian and even begin to think that we are not changed for it is by the power of Christ in our lives that we are now led; not by our own desires but by the desires of our heart; a heart transformed by God.

Jesus is coming to town. He has an agenda: to seek and to save and to change the world one person at a time. Let me invite you to climb a tree and watch to see what he is up to. But beware! He may stop beneath the tree where you sit. No matter how comfortable or complacent or secure or even immobile you may be, know that Jesus may look at you and invite you down; down to fellowship with him, down to the opportunity be transformed. It takes courage to get out of that tree, but the gift of new vision and the reordering of priorities are more than worth it.

In the end, Jesus declares that salvation has come to the house of Zacchaeus; that he, too, is a son of Abraham. Zacchaeus was just lost; distracted by the world. Like you and me, he had become confused about why he was here, and whom he was to serve. Let us offer thanks to our God today that Jesus comes looking for us and invites us all to a better life.

O God, we too need you to redeem our past, to transform our present, and to redirect our future. Call us out of the places we sit today and show us how to be the people you would have us be. In the name of Jesus Christ our Savior, we pray. Amen.