

Luke 19: 1-10
How to Grow Tall
First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Lynn Vahle
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“Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he”. I suppose a large percentage of us learned that little song in Sunday School. And I would venture to say that song has influenced our thinking about Zacchaeus and his encounter with Jesus. It influences how we see Zacchaeus and whether we can identify with his experience or not. Zacchaeus, we have always thought, was short in stature but the story from Luke’s Gospel points out the many other ways Zacchaeus was ‘short’. He was short on integrity, he was short on character, he was short on honesty, and he was short on faith. He was in every sense a little man and that had nothing to do with his height.

Before we get too critical of Zacchaeus I want to have you open your Bible to chapter 19 of Luke’s Gospel and look at something with me. Something I have never seen before and which I learned from one of the expositors of this text. Look at vs. 3 and read it carefully. See where the comma is placed? The statement about being short is ambiguous. It could apply to Zacchaeus but it could also apply to Jesus. Zacchaeus couldn’t see Jesus because the crowd was in front of Zacchaeus and Jesus was short. It is ambiguous in English but it is even more ambiguous in the Greek and in the Greek it is impossible to know if the phrase applies to Zacchaeus or Jesus. This interpreter of the Gospel also gave other non-biblical references that say that Jesus was short. That little piece of information challenged my thinking about Jesus and Zacchaeus. I’ve always assumed Jesus was tall. Why?

At any rate I bring it up mostly to help us think in new ways about Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was a man of position with some importance in the city of Jericho. He did have stature. He worked for the Roman government collecting taxes, primarily the taxes everyone had to pay whenever they would transport goods from one place to another. We are told he was the chief tax collector, a designation that isn't used again in the entire Bible. He was no doubt in charge of the tax office for the whole region perhaps even more than that. He would have been thought of highly by the city officials because he did his job well. We are also told, almost as an aside, that he was rich. That certainly gave him standing in the community. He no doubt lived in one of the fancy homes out on the hill and had sight recognition from the citizens with whom he lived. Even those who looked with disdain on what he did for a living had to admit that Zacchaeus was a force to be reckoned with. In many ways Zacchaeus is what a lot of us long to be. He was wealthy, he was successful, he had a certain amount of power and political clout. He was a respected member of the party in power. He was as one interpreter put it "an important part of the system of domination".

Jesus and the disciples are on their way to Jerusalem. Jericho is about seven miles north and east of Jerusalem and they pass through it on their way to their date with destiny in the capital city. They enter the city late in the afternoon and apparently word of their arrival precedes them. Word spreads that the controversial rabbi is coming through town and a crowd gathers. Zacchaeus is curious. He is after all a Jew and he has heard about this Jesus. He decides to go out and see what he can see. There are no curb side spaces left and from where he is he can't see a thing. Being athletic and resourceful he grabs a low hanging branch of a nearby tree and scampers to a perch high enough to see everything below. No doubt there were a few

people good naturedly taunting him for his unorthodox solution but also wishing they had thought of it first. He waves and smiles. He can see the small group moving down the road and he watches them with interest. Not exactly what he had expected. He thought Jesus would be more impressive, more regal, his disciples a bit more... well...official. Then they are directly below him and they stop. Jesus looks up and calls him by name. At first he's taken back - how did he know who I was? But then he's smiling glad to be recognized by even this visiting rabbi. The rabbi wants to stay at his home tonight.

Zacchaeus swings out of the tree, greets Jesus and warmly confirms that he and his disciples are welcome to spend the night. Zacchaeus is used to entertaining visiting dignitaries. It is no problem for him to provide a feast and comfortable lodging. Even as he becomes part of the traveling band of disciples his servants are running on ahead to make plans and alert the household staff.

Luke doesn't tell us all the details about the preparation or even their arrival at the house of Zacchaeus. Instead he directs us to the crowd who watched this whole unlikely scene play out. Luke tells us they began to grumble. Now you would expect that they would grumble at Zacchaeus because as a tax collector he wasn't universally well liked and somehow the parade they were all enjoying turned out to be about Zacchaeus. But they don't, they grumble about Jesus. "Doesn't he know what Zacchaeus does for a living? Doesn't Jesus know how he takes advantage of his own people? Doesn't Jesus know that Zacchaeus's wealth came out of their pockets?" Maybe if he had decided to stay in the home of a priest they would have been satisfied. Maybe if he had chosen to stay in the home of the president of the synagogue they would have been content. Maybe if he

had stayed with any pious Jew he would have been praised. But he went to the house of a sinner!

Jesus went to the home of a sinner. Zacchaeus welcomed him to his home with rejoicing is what the Greek says. And right here I think we have to stop and ask ourselves a few questions. How willing are we for Jesus to come to our homes? Are we content to worship him here in a sanctuary or watch him pass by on the streets of town but bar him entrance to the most private places of our living, our homes? Are we willing to welcome him into the inner sanctums of our life?

Luke doesn't tell us about the conversation around the table at Zacchaeus's . We don't know if Jesus questioned his way of making a living or confronted him about the duplicity of a Jew who worked for the Roman government. We don't know if Jesus pointed out all the ways that Zacchaeus had sinned by feathering his own nest without regard for where the money came from or the people who were harmed by his actions. What we do know is that when Jesus and Zacchaeus emerged from his home Zacchaeus was a changed man. In the words of Jesus, "salvation has come to this house today". Zacchaeus was repentant and ready to make the most generous type of restitution.

And maybe here we have to ask a few more questions. Zacchaeus not only let Jesus into his home he welcomed him into his finances and his business dealings. He opened up his books and let Jesus have a long hard look. And he obviously opened his heart to the different way Jesus had of viewing his wealth. Are we so willing to let Jesus see what we do with the wealth we have earned? Are we willing to let Jesus scrutinize the way we earn our keep? Are we willing to distribute our wealth according to the words and desires of Jesus?

Personally I don't think Jesus came down hard on Zacchaeus. In fact, I think Jesus did just the opposite. He showered Zacchaeus with love and total acceptance. He embraced Zacchaeus as a son of Abraham, a fellow Jew. In Jesus Zacchaeus was freely given what he had worked so hard to achieve - acceptance, respect, and self-worth. Jesus relieved Zacchaeus of the debt he couldn't pay by himself. Jesus took from Zacchaeus his feelings of guilt and never measuring up. Jesus set Zacchaeus free to be who he truly was in God's eyes. And in that acceptance and identification Zacchaeus was able to grow into his full stature.

In this story of Zacchaeus we see ourselves. We try so hard to make ourselves worthy, to reach our potential, but everything we need is to be found in the acceptance of Jesus. We cannot grow to our full stature without knowing the acceptance and love of God. The sacred encounter is the embrace of accepting and forgiving love. And it is that acceptance and love we are called to offer one another because it is the only way any of us ever grow to our full height.