

“That Wee Little Man”
Luke 19:1-10
Second Sunday after the Epiphany
January 20, 2008

*Short people got no reason
Short people got no reason
Short people got no reason to live*

*They got little hands
Little eyes
They walk around tellin’ great big lies
They got little noses and tiny little teeth
They wear platform shoes on their nasty little feet*

*Well, I don’t want no short people
Don’t want no short people
Don’t want no short people
‘round here¹*

Or at least not folks like Zacchaeus. Perhaps you remember Louie De Palma, the character played so famously by Danny DeVito on the old television series “Taxi.” Can you think of any other “vertically challenged” individual that you would rather *not* be around? Can you think of anyone else that is more mean, lecherous, sexist, selfish, and crude than him? Well, if you add corrupt and rich to the mix, then maybe. Once again, folks like Zacchaeus seem to fit the bill quite nicely. With the exception of Judas and Herod, there is probably no one else mentioned in any of the four gospels that comes with more baggage. There is no one else whose reputation is more soiled—at least initially. He was a person who led an absolutely horrible life. He lived for no one but himself. Yet it seems to me that at least one point in that life, coincidentally the point we read about in this morning’s lesson, he came to the realization that he was simply not where he wanted to be. And whether we are short or tall, extremely nasty or very sweet, that is a life moment with which we all can identify. Let me try and show you what I mean.

Luke begins his story by saying that one day Jesus was passing through Jericho. Then he writes, “A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was chief tax collector and he was rich.” In that one short line we learn so much. First of all, the name “Zacchaeus” is

¹ ©Randy Newman

of Hebrew origin, which reminds us that the “wee little man” we’re dealing with was a Hebrew. That is important, for while tax collecting has always been a universally despised profession, it is especially despised when it is one of your own who is doing the collecting. You may remember that Jericho was a part of Palestine, which at this particular time in its history was a Roman province. The taxes that Zacchaeus would have collected would have gone to further the Roman oppression of his own country, violating every tradition and standard his people held dear. So right away we know that there was a traitor in the midst, a Hebrew who was collecting taxes for those occupying the Promised Land. Not only that, but he was a chief tax collector, which suggests that he was a kind of overseer in charge of all of those who were collecting a large variety of taxes. And if all of that was not bad enough, he was very, very rich! He made a handsome living off the backs of his neighbors, which would have made him all the more despised. Oh, the people of Jericho hated Zacchaeus. As a matter of fact, there are some who suggest that it was not just to see Jesus that he climbed up in the sycamore tree. Rather he climbed up there to escape the pokes, jabs, and kicks of the crowd that surrounded him—the very people he taxed!

The story then continues with Luke saying, “He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, for he was short in stature.” There are two things that are interesting about that particular line. The first comes in Luke’s saying that he was trying to see Jesus. Think about that for a moment. Why would the chief tax collector, who had spent so much of his career ripping off his fellow Jews and not giving the religious or moral aspect of what he was doing a second thought, suddenly want to see who Jesus is? The placement of this story in the 19th chapter of Luke’s gospel suggests that Jesus had been around for a while. As a matter of fact, just 18 verses later Luke tells the story of the first Palm Sunday—which would have been three years into his ministry. It seems obvious that news of Jesus’ ministry had preceded him. The word on the street was that this man from Nazareth was the long-awaited Messiah. The general population was also aware of his reputation for miracles and was naturally anxious to see him. So why did Zacchaeus want to do the same? Why would this self-made, self-satisfied man want to get a good look at the one from Nazareth? We are not told why he

did, and it is always unfair to try and analyze from a distance. Mere curiosity has to be considered. But it seems to me that we must also consider that he was at least beginning to understand that his life was simply not where he wanted it to be. It seems to me that he must have realized that Jesus just may have been offering something he did not have. Could there be another reason why he literally risked his life by standing with the crowd, opening himself to all kinds of verbal and physical abuse? Well, let's move on.

In this same line in which we are told that Zacchaeus climbed that tree, we are also told that he was "short in stature." Now that is more than just a descriptive phrase. In ancient times, those who were short or had some other physical characteristic that was different from the norm would have been marginalized. While it did not necessarily detract from a person's standing, not "measuring up" physically would certainly not have been seen as a virtue. And, just as in our day, short people would have certainly been the butt of many a joke. Perhaps this accounts for some of the ways Zacchaeus related to his neighbors. Unmercifully taxing the people was certainly one-way to get back at how unmercifully cruel the people had been to him. But although that may be the case, that's not even the most important part of this description—especially for Luke. Earlier in his gospel, you see, Luke recorded Jesus' words about the futility of trying to add one single cubit to one's stature through work and worry. It was only God, Jesus reminded us, who can add that cubit, only God who can give us true stature. Keep that in mind as the story of Zacchaeus progresses.

Now let's take a moment and think about what we have heard so far. Someone wrote that Zacchaeus is a reflection of all of us. Most of us believe that we were created by God and filled with unlimited potential. We humans are very different from the other creatures of the world. So often we can reach the utter heights of existence. But so often we can also reach the absolute depths. I told you last week of a book several of us studied a few weeks ago. It is called "Beginnings," and it is a very readable introduction to the Christian faith. I can get you a copy, if you wish. In discussing our knowledge of the depths, the author offers the following example, "When we catch ourselves engaged in some thoughtless action or saying some unkind word, we shrug our shoulders and repeat

the time-honored excuse, ‘Oh well, I’m only human.’ But when we say that, we are lying to ourselves. Most of us are born with an innate sense that we must strive to reach our highest potential. Part of our emptiness is the feeling that we somehow do not measure up to who we ought to be.”² Theologically speaking, that not measuring up is called sin. Paul described sin as falling short of the grand mark that God has set for each of us. Falling short can happen to us in a variety of ways. Sometimes we fall short quite deliberately and other times we fall short very unintentionally. But whenever and however it does happen, it pushes us farther and farther away from the person God created us to be. Down through the centuries preachers and theologians have told us that falling short is at the heart of the emptiness we so often feel. They also tell us that our awareness of that feeling of emptiness, that feeling that we call either regret, shame, or guilt, that feeling that enables us to realize that we just may not be where we want to be, can be the first step in a journey to discovering a whole new life. Mark Twain once wrote: “People are the only animals that blush. Or need to.” It is my own belief that Zacchaeus finally got to that point of blushing—or at least realizing that he needed to. After a life of living only for himself, he finally realized that there was more to life. Coincidentally, the exact moment he came to that realization was also the exact moment that Jesus entered the city. And that is where this story gets really interesting.

With the crowd now lining the street, Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed up that sycamore tree in order to see Jesus. I am sure that he never expected to be seen up there. I suppose he thought that he was safe tucked away among its leaves and limbs. But as you know, that’s not what happened. Looking up from the road, Jesus saw him. It had to be a comical sight. Can you imagine Louie De Palma, a.k.a., Danny DeVito, perched upon a branch? Jesus had to have let out a good chuckle as he walked over to that tree. As he did, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Luke reports that despite the grumbles and name-calling coming from the crowd, the tax collector “hurried down and was happy to welcome him.” That’s an interesting response, don’t you think? As I mentioned, he never had much interest in religion or morality before. He never sought the approval of anyone but himself. So why

² Andy Langford and Mark Ralls, Beginnings, Abingdon Press, Nashville, 2003, p.39

did he come down? We can only guess. Perhaps Jesus' words were the first kind words spoken to him in ages. Maybe it was the first time someone actually spoke his name without some sort of expletive either before or after it. Or like I have already mentioned, my own personal belief is that he had finally come to the point of blushing, that he finally realized that his life was not where he wanted it to be. Whatever the case, he did come down from the tree and then invited Jesus into his house. Who knows what was said behind those closed doors? We do know, however, that according to Luke, when the two of them finally did come out of the house, Zacchaeus was a changed man.

How do we know? Well, Luke tells us as much. He writes that Zacchaeus said to Jesus, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." In contrast to the customary limit of giving 20% to the poor, Zacchaeus promised to give half of his possessions. In addition, and going far beyond the laws found in the biblical book of Leviticus, he promised to make a fourfold restitution to anyone he had defrauded or extorted. According to all of the rabbinic sayings of the day, that would have been a sure sign of true repentance. Zacchaeus would have left no doubt that he had become a changed man. And all of that is not even mentioning the fact that he now called Jesus "Lord"—something the apostle Paul would later say that no one could do except by the Spirit of God. Oh yes, the man who emerged from that house was totally different than he had been before. Zacchaeus, who was never able to add a cubit to his height, found real stature through Jesus' surprising invitation to come down out of that tree.

When I was in seminary, the late Rev. Fred McFeely Rogers came to speak at one of our convocations at SMU. Many of you are familiar with the Rev. Rogers, and probably didn't even know that you were. He was also known as "Mister Rogers," and you can still turn to PBS and see his show. And yes, when he walked into Perkins Lounge he stopped, removed his sports coat and shoes, and then put on his cardigan and sneakers before giving his lecture. Fred Rogers was an ordained Presbyterian minister who told us that he simply moved from the sanctuary to the studio to preach the gospel. While not using traditional Christian terminology in his conversations with young children, the

good news he shared was typically Christian. “I love you just the way you are,” was simply his take on an old saying about God’s amazing grace. I remember him telling us that children, just like adults, live in a world that is the complete opposite of what the good news proclaims. In an environment that says you are only valued by what you achieve, kids and adults desperately need to know that they are loved simply for who they are. But after reminding us of the unconditional nature of that grace, he also reminded us of the other, less familiar part of that old saying. Perhaps you have forgotten that the entire saying goes like this: *Jesus loves you just the way you are—but way too much to leave you that way!* And when I think about that old saying in relation to this morning’s story, I believe that is something that Zacchaeus learned intimately. As he emerged from behind those closed doors, he was able to show it in his words and his deeds. And that is why Jesus was able to say, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.”

When James Moore, pastor of St. Luke’s UMC in Houston, told the story of Zacchaeus and his probable realization that his life was not where he wanted it to be, he realized that so many of us just might be in the same situation. That’s why he wrote the following:

Listen now! Don’t miss the impact of this. Don’t miss the message for your life now!

- *If you are doing something you ought not to be doing...*
- *If you’re possessed by some bad habit that is tearing you apart...*
- *If you are living a lifestyle that you’re ashamed of...*
- *If you have gotten way from God and the church...*
- *If your heart is not right with God...*
- *If you want to change...*

God has the power to touch your heart and turn your life around. He can give you

*a new start, a new chance, a new beginning, a new lease on life... It happened for Zacchaeus...and it can happen for you and me.*³

There is an old folk tale that has been traced back to the city of Jericho. During the latter part of the 1st century, an old, diminutive, white-haired man could often be seen in a garden on the outskirts of the city, next to the road that led to Jerusalem. The townspeople considered him odd because he would always sit under one particular tree. Sometimes he was even seen to reach out a hand and touch the trunk of the tree, almost with reverence. Finally, someone asked him, “Why do you seem to care so much for that old sycamore tree?” The eyes of the tiny old man brightened, and a smile covered his face. He replied, “Because from the branches of this tree, I first met the Son of God.”

Jesus is calling your name this morning, wanting to meet you. Will you come down from your tree?

³ James W. Moore, “Grit, Grace, and Gratitude,” www.day1.net