

"WHY STAY UP IN THE TREE?"

Luke 19: 1-10

The story of Zacchaeus always has fascinated me. Why did this very successful businessman seek out Jesus? How can we connect the story of this tax collector to our lives in June of 2018?

How about if we start by looking more closely at Zacchaeus' life, where he lived, where he worked, etc.? We know that he was a prominent businessman. His home, Jericho, was a thriving industrial center. The area around the city had balsam trees that not only produced a marvelous fragrance but also an expensive perfume, which is the source of the spiritual "there is a balm in Gilead that cures the sin sick soul." It was a good place to be a tax collector and Zacchaeus had prospered.

Of course, few people like someone taking their hard-earned money for taxes whether it is to go to Rome or Albany but still he was looked upon as a flourishing citizen. He had a family and undoubtedly lived in the best section of town.

Wealthy, family, good health - so what was he doing up that sycamore tree?

Or put another way, why did Zacchaeus seek out this man from Nazareth? And he is not alone in doing so. Countless others have also looked to Jesus. Millard Fuller, the founder of Habitat from Humanity, comes to mind. He was a successful millionaire businessman when in some anonymous hotel room, he came to realize the signs of dissatisfaction with the way his life was shaping up. Drinking too much, a marriage falling apart, he knew he was headed in the wrong direction. Just maybe Jesus might help. He went on retreat to Koinonia, a great center for spiritual development near Jimmy Carter's hometown in Georgia that was racially integrated in the Deep South long before the civil rights movement. There Fuller got his act together and started a housing project that has provided homes for families around the world as perhaps some of you well know having worked on such houses in this area. There are many people who feel like Miller Fuller and show up for worship on a Sunday morning looking for something. We hear a lot about the decline of mainline religion in our society and yet on any given Sunday a significant part of the American people are worshipping somewhere. With all else that is available it is obvious that worshippers, as with Zacchaeus, are looking for deeper meaning in life.

We can try to analyze Zacchaeus' motivation. Perhaps the ostracism that came with collecting taxes for the hated Romans was getting to him. Someone mentioned this week that short people are "vertically challenged" and maybe he struggled with inferiority feelings. For some reason, with all the talk about bullying that we hear currently, I couldn't help speculating that perhaps Zacchaeus was a victim of bullying. Sure, he had money and position, but could he have heard taunts and nasty comments as he walked down the street? We don't know for certain what was going on in his life. All we can say for Zacchaeus, as for so many in 2018, is that in the midst of abundance something seems to be missing. In the midst of a lot of material possessions, still the

stresses of life lead a growing number to say, "There has got to be something more".

So what was Zacchaeus to do? He was searching for greater meaning and purpose in life and had heard that Jesus was helping people find some answers. Jesus was addressing a crowd not far away but when Zacchaeus arrives being so short he couldn't see the man from Nazareth. In desperation he climbed a tree. That's how determined he was to see if Jesus might provide the answer to what he was looking for in life. Isn't such persistent determination important for all of us as we seek for life's deeper meanings? And yet aren't we all guilty of not following through on our faith commitment all the time?

Look at what Jesus does for Zacchaeus and all the rest of us. He saw the tax collector up that tree and singled him out. Have you ever been in a situation where nobody knew your name? Have you ever had a feeling that nobody really cared what was going on in your life? Zacchaeus found out that Jesus cared about him, that Jesus wanted to get to know him. Again and again in the Gospels it is the personal touch of our Lord - a look, a hand on the shoulder, a word, that deeply affects people. Jesus knows who you are! Jesus cares about you! I hope that every time you enter this worship center you immediately sense the tremendous love that God has poured forth for you in the gift of Christ. That was Zacchaeus' feeling. As I look at the state of the church today, I think all congregates have to work harder at making people feel they count. It is a cold world for many today at work and at home and the church needs to be that "Cheers tavern" where everyone knows your name.

Then, Jesus invited himself to have supper at his house. Unthinkable! The people around Jesus were shocked. How could he eat with a disreputable tax collector? Always Jesus was pushing out the boundaries of acceptability to include more people. In a time when our society is badly divided by wealth, race, gender and sexual orientation, how we need to see our Lord breaking down all those boundaries. Whereas some would emphasize differences, Jesus saw the commonality of all of God's people. Whereas some would separate and stick to their own kind Jesus reached out to all.

It's hard to imagine how much Jesus' coming for dinner meant to Zacchaeus. In the New Testament, encounters with the Living Christ often are described in terms of food and attending a banquet. Sharing with Christ is like the greatest feast ever prepared. We need to hear again and again that we are people sharing in a Great Banquet because sometimes we forget that the Christian faith is not just about sacrifice and challenge, though it is that. It also is about joy, unbelievable and wonderful joy, not the kind that is shallow and superficial and fades with the first hint of a storm but a joy that moves in the depths and pervades our entire being. A young parent once told me that she took her 6-year-old son to a RPO children's concert at Eastman Theatre. Afterwards before going to bed the child was raving about the experience: the glorious theatre, the music, everything. He said, "Mom, that was wonderful. I am never going to forget this afternoon. I am going to remember it and remember and remember...at least until I am 19." Such exuberance ought to surround our faith experiences, but doesn't

this sense of excitement and joy seem to be missing in too many churches today?

Friends, it is a banquet opportunity we have this morning and every morning. You too have been invited to share with the Living Christ.

Zacchaeus was so touched by what transpired that he declared that he would give half of his wealth to the poor and never cheat anyone again. The individual who encounters Christ along the road of life is going to travel a different path. It may not be a grandiose transformation but in little and significant ways life will not be the same. Again and again, we read that those who were touched by Jesus' life responded by giving more of themselves, sometimes financially, sometimes in term of time and talent but always there is a response that involves how we live each day! We are not to just "talk the talk" but have "to walk the walk." That's what stewardship is all about.

An old legend tells how Zacchaeus, after his transformation, used to rise early every morning and leave the house. His wife was curious to know where he went and what he did, so one morning she followed him. At the town well he lowered a bucket, filled it with water, went out through the city gates and walked until he came to a sycamore tree. There, setting down the bucket, he began to gather and cast away stones and branches and rubbish that lay about the foot of the tree. Having done this he poured the water on the roots of the tree, and gently caressing the trunk with his hands, stood silent as if in affectionate reminiscence and contemplation. When his amazed wife came out of her hiding place and asked what he was doing, Zacchaeus replied, "This is where I found new life in Christ."

Zacchaeus was searching for "something more", something that gives life meaning and purpose, something we all seek.' The story also reminds us that after an encounter with Jesus kind words and good thoughts alone are not enough. The tax collector did not just say "thank you" and walk away. He had to live out his commitment. You will be surprised and pleased to see how life changes when you come down from the tree and your days are filled with joy and excitement and service.