

Sermon for October 30, 2016

"Zacchaeus Was A Wee Little Man"

Luke 19:1-10

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he." This story is a popular one for children. I think it is because the can identify with Zacchaeus' plight. We can all recall a time in our lives when we could see above the crowd. Especially children can appreciate this. Small children also appreciate the advantages of being lifted above the crowd whether by the branch of a tree or the shoulders of an adult.

But there was more to Zacchaeus than his stature. Zacchaeus was complex and intricate figure. The first thing that Luke tells us about Zacchaeus is that he was the chief tax collector. This means several things. First it tells us that he was an outsider. He was seen as a collaborator with the occupying Roman forces. But he was more than a mere social outsider. Because he dealt with Gentiles and their currency with its graven images, he was a religious outsider. He was looked down on and ridiculed.

Luke also tells us that he was rich. The tax collectors were like subcontractors for Rome. There was no complex income tax code. Basically once they collected their quota they could keep anything else that came in. So he had either become rich or enhanced his riches through his income tax business. And he was the chief tax collector for the area so he had his hands in a number of people's pockets.

Of course the only reason we know about Zacchaeus is because his path crossed with Jesus' one day. Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem. He was going to die there and had told his disciples as much on repeated occasions, but they did not understand. They couldn't grasp God's plan for him to die on the cross. And the idea that his sacrifice could wash anyone who believed of their sins had never occurred to them. But there Jesus was going to Jerusalem and the cross.

And there was a huge crowd. People had heard of Jesus and were thronging to him. Many came to be healed. Some came seeking spiritual wholeness. Others came just to see what the to-do was all about. And I imagine that under their breaths they whispered "Messiah" even though they didn't fully understand what that meant.

Just before Jesus entered Jericho a blind man had called for Jesus. He hollered "Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!"(Luke 18:38) "Son of David" was a term for the Messiah. Jesus heard him calling even though the crowds tried to silence him. And Jesus gave him his sight and he followed praising God.

When they came to Jericho the formerly blind man was probably still in the throng praising God, and Zacchaeus was there in the crowd. Luke says he was trying to see who Jesus was. He had heard of Jesus and he could see the commotion. He probably wanted to look for himself to see who this Jesus was.

But why was he interested in Jesus? Was it just curiosity? Here was a famous person who people though might be the King to free Israel from Roman oppression. Maybe Zacchaeus felt a need in his life. He was rich, but maybe something was missing. Maybe he was like the blind or the sick but a blindness or sickness of the soul.

We don't know. What we do know is that he went to the undignified end of climbing a tree. Here was a man that had to intimidate others with his power and he allowed himself to climb a tree in public to see over the crowd. He must have really wanted to see Jesus badly.

But what Zacchaeus did is nothing compared to what Jesus did. I am sure Jesus had seen any number of people climb trees and houses and such to see him. Remember the four friends who climbed on the roof with a man in a cot to see Jesus? But Jesus picks Zacchaeus out of the crowd and says, "Zacchaeus come down for I must stay at your house today."

This is surprising on many levels. It was an honor for anyone to have a famous rabbi like Jesus come to stay with them. It was not unheard of for a Rabbi to invite himself over for that reason. But this was a tax collector. Would he accept? And what would the good religious people say.

Well, Luke tells us what they said. They complained! "I have been a supporter of the synagogue here in Jericho for many years and I go to the temple in Jerusalem for every holy day and this Jesus goes and eats with this tax collector and sinner." But Jesus went and it had a profound influence on Zacchaeus. He even vowed to give half his possessions to the poor and to pay back four times any money made dishonestly.

Then Jesus replied, "Salvation has come to this house today, for he is one of God's people." Then I imagine Jesus eyeing some of the religious folk outside and saying, "For the Messiah came to seek out and save the lost." There is a subtle message in what Jesus says. Salvation came to Zacchaeus' house, but did it come to any others? Perhaps the good folk of Jericho have shut it out because they don't feel the need to be saved.

Zacchaeus was a wee little man. He was short in stature. But one might also say that he had been a small man in other ways. He had been a man of small character. Willing to do whatever he could to gain power and money. Even willing to turn his back on his community and religion to receive the accolades and wealth that Rome gave him. And Zacchaeus' smallness kept him from seeing what he was missing.

But one day Jesus changed that. Zacchaeus went out of his way to see Jesus and Jesus went out of his way to meet him. Jesus inspired him to rise above his small stature by climbing a tree and then Jesus raised him above his small character by helping him to repent.

There are a lot of people in our world seeking. They are seeking some meaning and some purpose in life. They may have heard of Jesus and they want to see who he is. Problem is that the religious people the Christ-ians or Christ people have written them off. "Don't waste your time with them, they don't go to church." But they are the very people Jesus came to save. And Jesus will reach out to them. Zacchaeus is proof of that!

But what about the religious folk; the good people of Jericho? That story ends with them on the outside being chided by the Lord. By the end of the story Zacchaeus has risen above his smallness. In the end the good people of Jericho are the small ones. Sometimes we Christians are the small ones. But the good news is that if we will admit that we are small, Jesus can raise us above our smallness too!