

**“Zacchaeus - A Sinner Saved”**  
**Luke 19:1-10**  
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When was the last time you climbed a tree? It's been so long, I can't even tell you the last time I tried. My childhood memories are full of tree climbing. But as an adult? It's a lot harder than it once was. But I can tell you the last time I saw Scott climb a tree. It would be more accurate to say I remember the last time I tried not to watch him climb a tree.

It was the spring of 2011, and we had just moved into our cabin at Highlands Camp in the mountains of Colorado. We were settling in and doing all those things that make home feel like home. For us that meant, among other things, setting up the bird feeders. In Colorado you must be careful about where and how you set up your bird feeders. If you aren't careful, you aren't just inviting the birds over for dinner...you are inviting the bears. So Scott came up with an ingenious plan to rig up a pulley system that suspended the bird feeders out from our deck over the mountainside. It was a clever plan. He could pull the bird feeders in to the deck to fill them and put them out again far out of reach of bears. The success of this plan hinged on being able to affix one end to our deck...and the other end to a pine tree 25 feet out from our deck down the hillside. And there was only one way to reach the loft branches of that tree. To climb it. And Scott did. He found his inner tree-climbing child, the child who delighted in trying to climb up just one branch higher, and then another. He climbed 30 feet up that pine tree to fasten the far end of that pulley system.

Scott climbed that tree because he was motivated, and adventurous. It brought our family no end of joy to feed the birds and watch them dance around the feeders. And there was a certain satisfaction in outsmarting the bears. But I can tell you with absolute certainty, if it had been up to me, I never would have climbed that tree. I would have sacrificed the joy of hosting our feathered friends if had meant putting myself, literally, out on a limb. I just wouldn't have done it. Climbing trees is for kids and for adults who aren't afraid to take risks.

So what got Zacchaeus to climb a tree? Well, Jesus, obviously. He climbed a tree because he wanted to see Jesus. Just a glimpse. But, my goodness, what he

must have had to overcome to climb that tree. Consider Zacchaeus for a moment. He is something of a challenge to comprehend. He was a tax collector, and not just a tax collector, but a chief tax collector. He was, you could say, a high ranking official in a pyramid power structure – the grand poohbah at the top who was profiting not only from the taxes he collected, but also the taxes collected by all the other tax collectors beneath him. He was a savvy businessman who had leveraged a relationship with the Roman government to earn him a rather high degree of wealth, but also a wealth of scorn. He may have been wealthy, but he was a pariah in his community. A sinner by default of aligning himself with occupying government and profiting from the outrageous and burdensome taxes exacted from the people. His office would have earned him the status of reviled outcast. A sinner.

But consider that word choice for a moment. In verse 3, we read that Zacchaeus is “short in stature.” [He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.] But, it can also be translated “the least.” [He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was the least.] This word choice is important because this word – short in stature/the least – is the same word that is used earlier in Luke, chapter 9:

<sup>46</sup> An argument arose among them as to which one of them was the greatest. <sup>47</sup> But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side, <sup>48</sup> and said to them, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me; for the least among all of you is the greatest.”

It is accurate that the text calls Zacchaeus a small man. He is, as the text describes, a small man, so “wee” he can’t see over the crowds. He is a small man in stature. But he is also a small man in status. The least among his peers, maligned to the fringes where he had no hope of seeing the Savior, unless he climbed a tree. But don’t miss the nuance here: Zacchaeus has the heart of a child – running ahead, climbing a tree to catch a glimpse of Jesus, excited at the prospect of seeing the Savior.

And he does see Jesus. And Jesus sees him. And Jesus sees into the heart of Zacchaeus and recognizes in Zacchaeus a child in his kingdom. Jesus doesn’t see a sinner deserving of scorn and ridicule. Jesus sees a beloved child of God.

“For the least among you is the greatest (Luke 9:48).”

“For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost (Luke 19:10).”

So, what does that mean for us?

It means if we are *the least* – the marginalized, the oppressed, the ridiculed, the ignored, the friendless – then Jesus is for us, seeking us, seeing us. That is good news for *the least* among us.

But what if we aren't *the least*? This story is set in direct contrast to the story that happens one chapter earlier. Another rich man comes to Jesus and asks, “what must I do to inherit eternal life? (Luke 18:18).” This rich man hasn't accumulated his riches by nefarious methods. He is, in fact, a leader in his community, esteemed by his peers, considered one of the most righteous among them. “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus instructs him to sell all he owns and distribute the money to the poor. Apparently it is too much to ask of him. He can't let go of all he possesses to follow Jesus. There is just too much to lose, not only his wealth, but also his status – his standing in the community.

Zacchaeus has nothing to lose. He is wealthy, yes, but he is already the lowest of the low. And he has already started giving it away, without Jesus even asking it of him: “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back 4 times as much (Luke 19:8).” There is some ambiguity in the text. The way we read it here it sounds as if Zacchaeus is going to turn over a new leaf, but it could just as accurately be translated to indicate Zacchaeus has already been doing this and is going to continue doing it indefinitely.

The rich man was labeled righteous but couldn't do the good, kind, generous, thing. Zacchaeus was labeled a sinner, but was striving to live a generous life. So what if you aren't *the least*? What if you possess more than enough to share, are loved by your family and friends, have a good reputation in the community? The answer is simple. Don't be like the rich man, be like Zacchaeus. Be generous even when it isn't required of you. Be generous because you love Jesus and Jesus inspires you to want to be generous.

What if you aren't either of these characters? What if you aren't so comfortable with your place in life that you can't imagine sacrificing it to follow Jesus? What if you aren't so small that you would climb a tree for Jesus?

What if you are just...one of the crowd? What if you are just a normal person, like all the other normal people? You love Jesus and want to follow him. You are willing to go where he goes, but you are content hanging back with the crowd. You can see him. You can hear him. And that is close enough. You wouldn't do anything so radical as try and reach for the hem of his garment, or tear a hole through a roof to get to him, or climb a tree to see him. But you are a good person, and you are learning from Jesus how to be a better person, and those small glimpses of him through the crowd are just enough to give your spirit a boost and get you through life for a while.

If that sounds like you - if you are one of the crowd, and happy being one of the crowd, you are in good company. But don't get too comfortable. Because you might need to move. It is altogether possible that you are getting in the way. There just might be someone out on the fringes of the crowd - someone not like you and the rest of the crowd, someone who doesn't really fit in with the crowd - who just wants to see Jesus. There might be someone who is ridiculed, marginalized, and rejected who is just trying to get close enough to Jesus to hear Jesus say, "you are mine; you belong to me." And shame on us if we are the crowd that keeps a child of God from knowing the love of God.

Even in the crowd we have a choice. We can claim our own space for our friends and neighbors, saving seats so we can all be together, and keeping out those who aren't one of us. Or we can look for *the least* and try to see them as Jesus sees them. We can look for *the least* and try and help them get to a place in the crowd where they can see Jesus.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, may you never lose your childlike faith, may you never stop running ahead and climbing trees to catch a glimpse of your Savior, may you always strive to make room so someone shorter than you can see him too.

Alleluia! Amen.