



A story about a guy who climbs up a tree to see Jesus is this week's parable from the Gospel of Luke. No wonder we remember it! Kids like it too! Climbing a tree has that movement of scrambling over branches, finding a perch, and looking at a different world, even our tree outside the Parish Hall. Ferris wheels bring us to the top, but tree climbing takes effort and is not for the faint of heart! So, why this particular story?

First, we are hearing again from Luke about a tax collector, one of the characters that Jesus uses as a foil to be the person who colludes with the Roman Empire, collects as much money as he can, and in the process loses the respect of the "religious folk." Zacchaeus, who is even remembered by name, is secondly called short, diminutive. People literally look down on him.

I wonder if, being a smart man, good with money, and already being marginalized for his size as a young man, Zacchaeus stepped into the roll of tax collector as a clever job to gain respect in some circles. I wonder too, why he unceremoniously climbed the tree to see Jesus. Was the crowd already pushing him out, cutting him off from seeing the celebrity because they could-- like when we push our way toward the front of a line when there are only so many tickets or places to sit—and we don't really know those others and they are weaker and easily pushed aside? This parable is dramatic because of what happens next.

Jesus notices him, asks him to come down (another awkward climb and jump) and announces that he is coming to his house for dinner. The interpreters throughout the centuries now diverge in interpretations. Zacchaeus says he gives half of his wealth to the poor—in response to grumbling (or murmuring) of the crowd ---or does he say he *will give*? Is he a man who has been good and righteous and dismissed because of his job and Jesus is recognizing his working toward justice by reminding the crowd he is a son of Abraham—or is this a conversion story, a story of repentance?

Both interpretations are possible and this story is a reminder that Jesus notices us and no matter what—we are changed. However, in this time of vilifying the other—for many different reasons---I suggest it is important to see the sin of the crowd also; they may simply think that this very short tax collector is a sinner and that Jesus should not eat with him. If we turn this around, Jesus recognizes his goodness and celebrates at dinner knowing the wisdom and faith of a man who is considered not worthy of Jesus' company. He is beloved of God; we are beloved of God and invited to be in the presence of Jesus.

In our text from Isaiah today we are reminded to all "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" because prayer alone does not change systemic injustice. Our actions in faith, as children of God, bring change and sometimes the most surprising people are bringing that change into being.

May we have the courage to climb trees to see Jesus and find ourselves affirmed on new paths of living and loving.

*Pastor Susan+*