

BLESSINGS IN A FIG TREE

LUKE 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, '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.' Then Jesus said to him, '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 to save the lost.'

When I was a kid I loved to climb trees, especially the pepper tree in our backyard. My sister and I even built a rickety tree house that we played in for hours, until one day it came crashing with me in it. From the tree you could spy on neighbors, hide from parents, and even gain access to the roof. I wonder why my parents never climbed the tree with us.

Years ago I got a call from a college friend who said he was “up a tree and needed a place to crash.” Being “Up a tree” was not a saying I knew, so I asked him if I should call the fire department to get him out of the tree. He wasn’t amused. Apparently what he meant was that he was drunk and had been kicked out of his house.

Being up a tree or going out on a limb is how many adults climb trees. Climbing trees can be dangerous, whether they be literal or figurative. Branches that look sturdy may be rotting or weakened. A strong gust of wind might snap a tree that is old or diseased. Climbing trees is not only exhilarating, it is also hazardous.

We see that mixture of danger and excitement in the most famous tree-climbing story in the Bible. Zacchaeus was -- as the old Sunday school song tells us -- a "wee little man", or, as the reading puts it in more politically correct terms, "short in stature". Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector -- a local entrepreneur who employed other tax collectors to collect all the tolls, tariffs and taxes in the local area. The tax collectors could charge the people whatever tax bill they wanted as long as their Roman bosses got paid the appropriate share. Whatever was left over got pocketed by the tax collectors as profit, and no one in that system would have profited more than a man like Zacchaeus. It's no wonder, then, that tax collectors were among the most hated people in first-century Israel. They were the ones who often left their countrymen "up a tree" over their heavy taxes and shrinking incomes.

Jesus, however, seemed to gravitate toward these degenerate entrepreneurs. Earlier in Luke's gospel, the religious establishment repeatedly mocks Jesus for being a "friend of tax collectors and sinners". Maybe that's why Zacchaeus wants so desperately to see Jesus -- the tax collector doesn't have any other friends, only enemies among the townspeople.

Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus so badly, in fact, that he "ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him because he was going to pass that way. Zacchaeus was really acting like a little kid. Running and climbing a tree were both considered to be undignified and an embarrassment for adult males in that culture. You can imagine the crowd snickering at the sight of that little weasel Zacchaeus running and climbing like some scared little boy to get above and away from the crowd. It was an act that would have pushed him even lower on the social scale, even though he was now taller than the crowd while lodged up in the branches of the sycamore, which can grow to more than 100 feet in height.

The Sycamore in the Middle East is not the same as a North American Sycamore. The Sycamore Zacchaeus was climbing was more of a mulberry fig tree with low branches, making it easy for the diminutive tax collector to climb.

As Jesus came into town, he noticed Zacchaeus there, up a tree in more ways than one. For Zacchaeus and for many people who find themselves on the margins of society, being up and away from the crowd can be a safe refuge. Zacchaeus might have taken his childlike actions to the next level and built a tree house up there where none of his many enemies could get to him.

Ultimately, however, living in the trees doesn't work. Eventually, you have to come down, and, when you do, it's better to have someone there to catch you.

Jesus looked at Zacchaeus hanging on a sycamore branch and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today". Jesus invites himself to the tax collector's home, another double, social no-no. Jesus calls him down from being up a tree, out on a limb and hanging onto life by his fingernails. In doing so, Jesus continues to be guilty as charged for hanging out with all the wrong people. Indeed, the crowd began to "grumble," saying, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner". Well, actually, Jesus was acting more like the host than the guest, which was often the case when Jesus came to dinner.

Zacchaeus had gone up a tree seeking Jesus, but it was Jesus who came seeking Zacchaeus on his way to Jerusalem. "The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost," says Jesus, and showing up in the house of this tiny tax collector demonstrated to everyone in the crowd that those who were up a tree in their lives were the ones Jesus **was** and **is** seeking.

When Jesus says he came to seek and save the lost, he is not talking about rescuing a sinner from the hands of an angry God and sending him to heaven in the sweet by and by. The salvation that Jesus gives changes Zacchaeus' life through and through, and, as a result, it benefits those around him. The poor benefit from Zacchaeus' change from greed to generosity, receiving half of the tax collector's possessions, which would have been substantial. Those who have been defrauded by Zacchaeus' corrupt actions will receive a *four-fold* restitution, making them suddenly solvent and secure again. When Zacchaeus is saved, the whole community benefits.

Jesus came looking for people who were up a tree. Jesus has come to invite us down, to offer us a new life, to live lives that reflect the kind of healing, wholeness and salvation his kingdom brings. And once we have encountered Jesus, once we have accepted his invitation, then we are to invite others to lives that are firmly grounded in his grace.

Who do you know who's up a tree right now? Maybe it's that single mom in your neighborhood who is trying to hold down a job and care for a couple of kids. Maybe it's that elderly person who sits alone in church and whom no one notices. Perhaps it's that guy at work who struggles with

an addiction, or the kid who has been abandoned by his parents. Chances are there are lots of people around you every day who are up a tree and needing an invitation to come down.

Can we be the church that follows Jesus' example, and invites them to dinner, to a conversation, to a new way of life? Oh, it's still a major social faux pas to invite ourselves to dinner at their house. Only Jesus can get away with that! But every one of us has the opportunity to invest ourselves in someone else's life, offering him or her the kind of grace and love that Jesus has offered us. And when we invest ourselves with others, that investment often translates to fruit that benefits the whole community. When the lost tree dwellers begin to come down, we begin to see the kingdom of God at hand.

In the town of Jericho today there stands a massive sycamore tree that the Palestinian guides say is the real tree that Zacchaeus climbed up as Jesus approached. Whether it is or not doesn't really matter. It looks like a tree that would be fun to climb, but it's no place to live. Zacchaeus came down and left the tree behind for a new life.

Can we help others do the same?