

Text: Luke 19:1-10

In Paul Harvey style, I'd like to open with the rest of the story this morning. We know a little about the life of one important first century man from the "Stromata," which are the writings of St. Clement of Alexandria. According to St. Clement, this man was a ministry companion to none other than the holy apostle, St. Peter himself. And perhaps more importantly, this man was chosen by the apostles to replace Judas of Iscariot after Judas betrayed Jesus. They renamed this man Matthias, later known as St. Matthias, and he went with St. Peter to preach the Gospel in Rome and throughout Ethiopia and Macedonia, suffering terrible persecutions of many kinds. Tradition holds that during Nero's reign this man finally accepted a martyr's death for Christ. His was a life lived without compromise for Jesus and for the love and sake of the Gospel. And I suppose he would want us to mention his name, the name most of us know him by from the Gospels...Zacchaeus (and now you know, the rest of the story).

Zacchaeus did not start out as a saint seemingly destined for martyrdom, however. Zacchaeus was a man very short in stature (what our children's song called a "wee little man")- but he was considered small not for height, but for his life. The criticism, "he is a little man" would have applied to him in more ways: he was a chief tax collector, a publican. And as mentioned last week, many of us know that tax collectors were not well liked back then, and they're not too well liked today either, but we should take a moment to recall just how hated publicans were and why. To become a tax collector in Jewish society was understood as a serious moral failing. It was tied not only to national betrayal but religious betrayal, because a tax collector worked for pagan Rome, had to swear a pagan oath of fidelity to the emperor, and offer pagan sacrifices to his spirit. But publicans not only served Rome's interests, levying taxes upon their own people, but as a matter of course they pursued their own greedy ends and collected money for themselves on top of the taxes, often becoming very wealthy in the process. The hatred

towards them was justifiable...this was very corrupt. And note that Zacchaeus was not just any tax collector either, he was a "chief" tax collector: a wealthy fat cat, the corrupt of the corrupt. He was despised and, as all tax collectors, was understood to be an outsider- a sinner- having abandoned their place as part of the chosen people of God.

When Zacchaeus hears about Jesus, he would have known that people were excited and claiming Jesus was the Messiah. It was understood at the time that the Messiah would overthrow Roman rule and thus, was viewed as a direct threat to the way of life and livelihood of any tax collector. Yet despite this, Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus. When Jesus passes through Jericho, Zacchaeus tries to catch a glimpse of Jesus but he is pushed aside, likely because he is despised by the people, in addition to being too short to see above the crowd. Just think for a moment what combination of humility and excitement must have been present within Zacchaeus to, in his fancy clothes and all, hike up into a Sycamore tree like a little child in order to see Jesus. It was an unlikely, if not impossible, scenario. But he does it anyway.

And then something even more unlikely happens: Jesus sees him and stops. I wonder if Zacchaeus became exceedingly self-conscious in that moment, perhaps expecting to be chastised. Instead, Jesus says, I suspect with a big smile, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." Zacchaeus quickly scrambles out of the tree and is filled with joy! But right away the grumbling begins: the crowd is shocked, horrified, indignant that Jesus would dare dine with a sinner like Zacchaeus. It was not lawful for a "clean" Jewish man like Jesus to accept a dinner invitation from a sinner, and to have table fellowship with them, but Jesus breaks this regulation by inviting himself to Zacchaeus' house. No doubt Jesus lost some followers that day for it, but I don't know if things have changed all that much today though.

The story is told by Brennan Manning in his book *The Ragamuffin Gospel* about a man who commits a big sin- it's public and he gets excommunicated from his church and is told never to return. Later

the man repents and wants to be restored. He prays, "Lord, they won't let me in because I am a sinner." To which he describes God's reply: "What are you complaining about, they won't let me in either."

Another story is told about a woman who said to the pastor of a new church plant that she planned to bring a friend to his brand-new church. "Great" the pastor said. The woman responded, "Well, no, she is an atheist." "Great" the pastor replied again. "No, I don't think you understand" she said "...she is not a nice woman at all." "Great!" the pastor said enthusiastically. The woman stared at him for a moment and then said, "Wow, I've been looking for a church like this my entire life!"

The Church and religious communities can be gatekeepers: places that keep the very people out who most need to be there...and this sorry behavior flies directly in the face of so much of what Jesus did during his earthly ministry. The story of Zacchaeus is a wonderful example of the expansive wideness of God's mercy and Kingdom where Jesus reaches out to those on the margins and those who were despised. Jesus doesn't merely tolerate their presence; he has table fellowship with them. And we continue to be invited to table fellowship with Jesus – in the rite of Communion, Holy Eucharist.

So, notice what happens when Jesus is at Zacchaeus' home: Zacchaeus does what the rich young ruler in the Gospels could not do: he gives up his wealth vowing to give half of all that he has to the poor and to repay anyone he has defrauded four-fold. This is genuine conversion. Jesus responds by saying, "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."

The crowds are angry at what Jesus does – and in this story we are invited to see ourselves in the crowd ask whether we really "see" the overlooked, the outcasts, the marginalized, and all those who have been pushed aside or had to climb trees to see Jesus. Do we see them and welcome them to

Jesus' table? Or are we too busy casting judgment like the crowd?

If we turn our back on the lost, we turn our back on Jesus, because they too are children of God. And if we know ourselves to be lost, then this is great news for us. If you feel that you are not worthy of Christ, Jesus is looking at you today and asking you to climb down off of that lie, because Jesus wants to come home with you, to your house, to be with you, to embrace you, your sins and shortcomings and all. It doesn't matter what other people think: it matters what God in Christ thinks, and you are loved and saved by faith and God's grace. Notice that Zacchaeus himself is praised by Jesus, not for his deeds – though his generosity could be a stewardship sermon in itself – but for his faith.

If you truly want to see Jesus, not only WILL you see Jesus, but Jesus will see YOU. God sees you, God loves you, and God's loving glance can save you, whoever you are, no matter how small or insignificant you might feel, and make you great in the Kingdom of God.