



The Trinity Pulpit



A New Perspective

Luke 19:1-9

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When we were young, many of us were taught the little song about Zacchaeus. You might remember the words and the motions:

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a
wee little man was he.
He climbed up in the sycamore tree for
the Lord he wanted to see.
And as the Lord was passing by he looked
up in the tree and said,
Zacchaeus, you come down from there;
For I am going to your house today,
I am going to your house today.*

That is the story of Zacchaeus that most of us know. Most of us know little more about this story and the purpose behind its being included in Luke's gospel. But I want to suggest to you today that this story is not simply a children's bedtime story. It is not a story that is only appropriate to be taught and heard by our preschoolers. In fact, the story of Zacchaeus is a story about a man like so many others we know. It is a story about a man who was powerful. He had influence in the private sector and in the government. It is a story about a man who had goals and had climbed the corporate ladder. It is a story of someone whose hard work, keen business dealings, and taking advantage of the moment and others had made him a very rich man. He was rich, powerful and successful, but it had come with a cost. He was isolated. He was isolated from those he worked for and with. He was isolated from his community. Here is a man who seems to have it all. He is rich, powerful and successful, but he is also empty. There is something more he wants in life. There is a longing within him that is inferred by the words "he wanted to see who Jesus was."

You can call it curiosity or you can call it desperation. Some think that Zacchaeus was only curious like everyone else who lined the street day. Like the rest, he wanted to catch a

glimpse of the prophet from Nazareth. The reputation of Jesus was spreading, so that day as Jesus was passing through Jericho a crowd had gathered to see this prophet and healer. Zacchaeus might have simply been like the rest who wanted to see Jesus out of curiosity, but his actions speak of desperation. He cannot see and because he has destroyed every friendship he has, no one will make a place for him. No one will give him a leg up. No one will give him a boost. I am sure they quite enjoyed the fact that Zacchaeus was struggling to see. We find that he climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus.

Now for a grown man to run or climb like Zacchaeus did was something that was beneath a man of maturity and power. You might remember the story of the prodigal son when we are told that as the father saw his son still a long way off, the father ran to the son. That was a shocking statement by Jesus. For it was not accepted in this culture for a man of dignity to run in public. If a person ran, then some emotion had taken over his good sense, even more so to climb a tree like a child. Yet, there Zacchaeus was – up a tree.

As Jesus is passing through, he notices Zacchaeus and stops and speaks to him. "Zacchaeus come down now. I must stay at your house today." There is this word *must* that is an interesting word. It indicates purpose and not chance or happenstance. It might appear that Jesus was passing through Jericho, but in the encounter with Zacchaeus his passing through takes on the purpose of encountering the desperate Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus' response is he will give half of what he has to the poor and if he had cheated anyone he would return to them four times as much as he had cheated them. Then Jesus announces that salvation had

come to Zacchaeus and his house. A life had been changed. Zacchaeus had a new perspective on life.

What is the significance of Zacchaeus' change of direction? It was a reminder that Jesus has come to give us all new life. We know a lot about Zacchaeus from the description we have of him by Luke. We are told that he was a chief tax collector in Jericho, and he was wealthy and he was also a short man. This description tells us much about this man's priorities and life.

The tax collector was despised by the Jewish people. Most of the time, like Zacchaeus, the tax collector in the Roman Empire was a man of the same nationality of those from whom he was collecting taxes. The Roman Empire used these men to gather the tax they had imposed on the nations and people they had conquered. Most of the Jewish people despised Rome for their occupation and despised them even more for taxing them to pay for their occupation. In addition to the collection of taxes, many times there was corruption in this government system that allowed for the tax collector to collect what they could, and as long as Rome got their part they did not care how much extra the tax collector made. So many times the tax collector became a very wealthy man by overcharging the people. The tax collector was viewed as a traitor to his people. He was a person who was a "sinner" because he participated with the pagans of Rome in continuing the occupation of God's nation. The tax collector was usually grouped in with prostitutes and the worst of society when referred to in the Bible. They are part of this group referred to as "the sinners."

Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector. He not only controlled his own collection but that of others, and the implication is that he is a sinner among sinners. He is located in a very rich trade town of Jericho, so the comment that he is wealthy is almost an understatement. I wonder if those who first read Luke's gospel would have commented by saying "no kidding." Of course he was wealthy man.

He is the kind of man in our world who is publicly despised but privately envied. He is the person who others look at and cannot believe he has been successful when they have not. He is the person that others whisper under their voices about how he must have made his money or how he has too much money it is almost obscene. Yet, in their heart of

hearts they are envious and jealous of what he has.

The story of Zacchaeus reminds us that for all of our success in our careers, for all of the wealth we might accumulate and the power we might believe we have, the truth is we have nothing without a relationship with God. Zacchaeus is the man who others believe never gives God a second thought. They are the people we work with who seem to never be open to talking about God. They are the people who have made gods of their work, wealth and reputation and we believe never give spiritual things one thought. But Zacchaeus reminds us that there is within us all a longing to see Jesus.

Zacchaeus found a new direction in every area of his life. First, he found a new perspective. Many scholars have described Zacchaeus' climb up that tree as a way of suggesting Zacchaeus found a new perspective on life.

In the movie *Dead Poets Society*, Mr. Keating, played by Robin Williams, encourages his students to stand up on their desks and take a look around. At first this group of wealthy, conservative, non-risking boys of a private New England prep school is reluctant to follow his actions, but then finally, one by one, they get up on their desks and take a look around. Keating encourages them to look around and see life from a new perspective. The lesson is that there are times when we need to take a moment and look around us and discover if the life we are living is really the life we desire. That seems to be the situation with Zacchaeus that day in Jericho. He climbed up the tree and gained a new perspective on life. What was it that gave him his new perspective? It was seeing Jesus.

Jesus and his kingdom have a way of reordering our lives. Jesus has a way of stripping away that which we thought was so important and reminding us of what is really true and lasting. Jesus has a way of letting us see ourselves as we really are and not the way we portray to others and have convinced ourselves we are. Zacchaeus got a new perspective on life that day when he climbed up a tree, and the result was a complete new direction for his life.

There is a change of heart. He goes from being a man who is proud and self-reliant to a man who is humble and contrite. He is a man who has a change in action. He says, "right now I give half that I have to



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the poor and if I have cheated anyone then I will repay them four times that amount.” That act was way beyond what was necessary. If you robbed someone, the law said that double of that which was taken was to be returned. If there was robbery and a confession of wrong doing, then the original had to be returned along with one fifth. It was only if robbery was intentional and a violent act that the restitution of four times the amount was applied. Zacchaeus applies to himself the harshest penalty as his repentance to reveal the change of heart that has come in his life.

Jesus says of this change of heart and action that salvation had come to Zacchaeus. Salvation, being put right with God, had occurred to Zacchaeus. The man who had it all needed salvation. The man who others thought never thought about God needed salvation. The man who had lived his life without God had received salvation.

What made Jesus stop that day at the sycamore tree? One writer said it was “that crashing noise.” It was the crashing noise made by a man’s ego when all they had counted on and had become was not enough. It is the crashing noise that is heard when we gain the perspective of the kingdom of God and all of our kingdoms come crashing down. It is the moment of a new direction.

Today might be your day. You did not expect it any more than Zacchaeus did, yet you know in your heart that something has to change. What you’re counting on and how you’re building your life is not working. It has left you empty, searching and desperate for that which would fill your soul. You don’t look desperate, but you are. Others don’t know your desperation, but you are a good actor and if they only knew the emptiness that you feel, they would be shocked. A new perspective is what you need. Salvation is what you truly desire.

But understand that Zacchaeus’ new perspective is not the only new direction in this text. There is the lesson of the new perspective of the kingdom of God. Look at what the others do when Jesus speaks these words of salvation to Zacchaeus. They do not rejoice; on the contrary, they are indignant. We are told they murmured or muttered to themselves “he has gone to be the guest of a sinner.” The word for murmur or mutter is that of a crowd that speaks among themselves with disgust and dissatisfaction. It is the word that is used to describe the people of God during the Exodus. As the people followed

Moses in the desert, they murmured against Moses and against God. They were dissatisfied with the acts of Moses and with God. They did not believe that God knew what was best and were not sure they wanted to be a part of it.

That is the thought behind this word in Luke. The people murmured and said Jesus is going to be the guest of a sinner. It is the implication that if this is what Jesus is about, I am not sure I want to be a part of it. If this is the priority of Jesus, then I am not sure I want his priorities to be my priorities. If this is the model I am supposed to follow, then maybe I should find someone or something else to follow. He does not know what is best. In fact, the word also implies that Jesus does not understand that his reputation and ministry could be destroyed or tarnished by such an action.

But Jesus says there must be a new direction by the people of God toward those who are without a relationship with God. We need a new direction in how we view people. They viewed Zacchaeus as a sinner, but Jesus said, “this man, too, is a son of Abraham.” Jesus was reminding them that Zacchaeus was loved by God and belonged to God like they did. God’s forgiveness and love was as available to a man like Zacchaeus just like it was to those who saw themselves as the people of God.



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It is interesting that Jesus said that he had come to seek and to save that which was lost. What is interesting is the word *lost*. In the New Testament when the word *lost* is used, it does not imply “the damned” or “not loved by God.” The word simply means to be out of place. Think of the trilogy of parables that Jesus tells us about being lost. There is the lost sheep. The one that wanders from the fold and the shepherd leaves the others to return it to the fold. There is the lost coin. The woman sweeps the house clean until she finds the valuable coin. Then, there is the lost son who goes off to a far away country only to come to his senses with a new perspective on his father and his home. The son returns home and is forgiven and received into the father’s house. In each of these illustrations the item, animal and person who is lost is not damned, but missing. They are out of place. They still belong to the shepherd, the woman and the father, but they are lost. They are not where they were meant to be.

When someone is lost it is not that they were not created by God and loved by God. It is that they are

out of place. They are not where they were created to be. Now the danger is that unless we realize we are out of place and not where we were created to be we can spend eternity lost or out of place. The Bible teaches us that hell was not created for us but for the devil and his angels. So, when a person chooses to reject the love of God they remain out of place and ultimately can choose to remain lost from God for eternity. But, understand what Jesus is saying: "he has come to seek and to save those which are lost." He came to remind us that every one of us is loved by God and until we are in a relationship with the living God we are out of place.

This changes how we view the "sinners" around us. They are not loved less by God but equally with us. They are not somehow destined to live a life of sin, but they are lost. They are simply out of place. They are not where God intended for them to be. All of a sudden we gain a new perspective on those around us. They, too, are children of Abraham. They, too, are loved by God. They, too, belong to God. They just need to be reclaimed by the love and forgiveness of Jesus Christ. We need a new direction when it comes to how we see others around us.

How is this going to happen? Let me suggest it will happen as our passing through moments become sacred moments. We must deal with two words in these texts that seem in competition. There is verse 1 when we are told, "Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through," and verse 5 when Jesus says, "I must stay at your house today." Jesus was passing through. It is the indication that Jericho was not his destination. Jericho was not a stopping place. Jericho was just on the way to somewhere else. Yet, when he notices Zacchaeus, there is the indication that there is a purpose for his being there in that moment. One statement indicates no purpose but passing through and one suggests a real purpose. These might appear to be in contradiction, but instead they are teaching us something very beautiful about the work of the kingdom of God.

It is this: The work of the kingdom of God occurs when we allow our "passing through" moments to become sacred moments. Jesus was so in tune to the needs of others that even his routine became an opportunity for something holy to occur. That is the new direction we need in our lives. We must

begin to live with Jesus in such a way that even in the everydayness of everydayness, the sacred has the opportunity to happen.

The other day I was with a group of people who, for some time, did not realize I was a pastor. My participation in this group was the result of my alumni standing at Tennessee. About half way through the meeting it became known that my vocation was a local pastor. We continued our meeting and finished our business. As we were about to leave, the man sitting next to me pulled me toward him and whispered to me some information. I could hardly hear him in the middle of this noisy restaurant in which we were standing. He told me that he had experienced a cancer scare that week and had just received news that what he had was treatable and not a much deadlier form of cancer. He asked me if I would voice a prayer of thanksgiving with him and for him. So we did. We bowed our heads in the middle of this noisy and busy restaurant and prayed. We gave thanks for his news and for God's grace. We asked for God's healing in the days ahead. I did not go there that day for that reason. I went to have lunch and talk about my alma mater, but in my passing through there became a moment for something sacred and holy.

It can happen to all of us. It is when our co-worker mentions their struggle at home or a physical struggle. It can happen when our children ask questions about God in the middle of dinner. It can happen when we are dealing with a client that seems troubled. It can occur at a restaurant, the ball field, the grocery store or the gym. When we begin to see people as those loved by God, then that which is sacred and holy invades every moment of life.

Zacchaeus was a wee little man, but his story is filled with some big lessons. He reminds us that no matter what we have filled our lives with, we are still desperate until we find Jesus. He reminds us that everyone is loved by God and there are those who are simply lost, out of place, and need to be reclaimed by God's love. His story reminds us that every moment of life can become a sacred one when we are aware of the kingdom of God.

Zacchaeus reminds us that there is always time for a new perspective and a new direction.

