

Out on a Limb

Luke 19:1-10
Psalm 119:137-144

Crossroads Christian Church
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This sermon is for all the geeks, nerds, and other outsiders in high school. This is for all those who have, at least part of the time, felt too short, too tall, too thin, too fat, too clumsy, too shy. This sermon is for all of those who have had to compromise their morals or values for the sake of a job. This sermon is for all those who have felt rejected, unloved, or unwelcome. And if I didn't cover everyone, this sermon is for you, too. And for me. Hello, Zaccheus. (wave) Hello, Zaccheus. (wave at self)

Children love the story of Zaccheus. Why? Because children are short in a world of tall people. They can't see through the crowd, and they get overlooked. They miss out on what's going on. Besides, Zaccheus was good at something that children are good at—climbing trees. And kids know, they trust deep-down inside, that Jesus will pay attention to them, that Jesus cares for them.

So, we have a story that's a favorite of everybody's. The love and acceptance of Christ just pour out all over the page. It's gospel—good news. God offers forgiveness and grace, and invites us to accept.

But maybe I'm getting ahead of myself—generalizing too much. Let's look at Zaccheus again. Who was he like, this person who put himself out on a limb to see Jesus? One Bible scholar says that the very name Zaccheus may have been derived from the Hebrew word meaning "innocence." Can you imagine growing up with a name like "Innocence?" "Hey, here comes Innocence." Such a name might have made him feel like an outsider from the start—especially since he was shorter than average. So maybe it's understandable that if he was a shrimp, a sissy named "innocence," that he didn't have much to lose as an adult by signing up with the Roman Empire as a tax collector. He was a loser anyway, so maybe he could become a winner by

being on the right side—the side that had the armies. As a tax collector for the pagan, alien invaders who made everybody’s life miserable, Zaccheus was responsible for collecting a certain amount of taxes from the citizens of Jericho—and however much more he collected, well, that was his salary. That was his opportunity to become rich and powerful. Faithful Jews saw him as a collaborator with the enemy, a traitor, an outcast—not the kind of person that people would make way for in a crowd.

So Zaccheus, enterprising as he was, took a risk. He would be an easy target for the crowd out on that sycamore branch, of taunts, maybe even of stones. And he would also be an easy target for the rabbi that he had wanted to see so badly. Maybe, out on that limb, he trembled, imagining Jesus’ finger pointing at him, and calling out “sinner!” making him an example of how *not* to love and serve God. But yet, Zaccheus had heard so much about this Jesus—the wonderful things that he had said, the blind man that he had healed—and he had even forgiven people their sins. So he was willing to take a chance.

Along came Jesus—the same Jesus who, as Luke records it just a little earlier in the story, had had an encounter with a rich young man, a man who had walked away sadly when Jesus had challenged him to go and sell all that he had and to give it to the poor. It was the same Jesus who had told his disciples that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And here comes that same Jesus. And here sits the rich man, the corrupt, conniving, anything for a buck rich man, despised by all. If we weren’t so familiar with the story, if we didn’t love the story so much, we would be as shocked, surprised, and upset as was the rest of the crowd at Jericho.

“Zaccheus, come down! For I’m dining with you tonight.” Jesus didn’t challenge him to sell all that he had; Jesus didn’t condemn him; Jesus didn’t look past him; Jesus invited himself to supper. Now remember—good Jews wouldn’t eat with people like Zaccheus, for such people were

unclean. They handled money with images of pagan gods on it; money touched by other unclean people; they hung around with the pagan Romans; and they didn't follow the laws of justice and fairness. So what kind of person would eat with Zaccheus? Only other outsiders, other sinners, other traitors, it would seem. But now Zaccheus has the world's most surprising dinner guest—Jesus, the one whom some were calling the Messiah. Zaccheus probably didn't feel the twigs and bark scraping at his legs as he scrambled down the sycamore tree. His heart was filled with joy and surprise. He was being treated as a human being, as a good Jew, even. When others muttered and murmured, Jesus said that Zaccheus was truly a son of Abraham. For hadn't Abraham taken the risk, taken the initiative to follow God into the unknown? Now it was Zaccheus' turn to take the journey of faith. Not only did they dine together, but Zaccheus promised to give a small fortune to the poor, and to pay back fourfold those whom he had cheated—not because Jesus expected him to, but as an expression of joy, an expression of gratitude for the salvation that had visited his house that day.

So Zaccheus became an example—not the negative example that he had worried about becoming, but an example of the power of the grace of God. For this rich man, this compromising, scheming, hard-hearted tax collector, had, like the camel, made it through the eye of the needle. God, through Jesus, had sought him out, and invited him back into the family. And through him, his household was saved, was brought back into God's family. The word "salvation" as Jesus used it doesn't refer only to saving one's soul for heaven, it also means being made well, being made whole, being healed on this earth, as well. For Zaccheus was healed, just as surely as the blind man who now saw; just as surely as the lepers who were now clean. And the money he gave to the poor, the money he gave back to those he cheated, may well have given new hope, new life, new possibilities to others in town, the goodness expanding like ripples spreading out on a pond.

Zaccheus responded with joy, and that which had been the most important thing in the world to him, his money, was no longer important. For the love of God gave him the sense of belonging, the sense of acceptance, the ability to love and be loved that money could never give.

What joy can be ours, like the joy of Zaccheus, when we accept, truly accept, the love that God has revealed to us in Jesus Christ. What joy we know when we recognize that we are part of God's family, eating together. Whether we're a seeker looking for a living relationship with God for the first time, or we've been a member of the church for 80 years, God invites us to go out on a limb, to take a risk of loving God, to let God more fully into our lives. Christ still invites us to invite him in. Amen.