

The Sycamore Gospel

Text: Luke 19: 1-10

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When I was a kid, I loved to climb trees. I was never reckless about it but there were times I was foolishly fearless and did some pretty nutty things. Among the rascals in my gang I was always first to scamper up the branches and get to the top to announce my arrival.

My eye for the best trees was legendary in the hood and, back then, I had the sort of athletic agility and balance necessary for the art of the climb. And often, on my way up, I was on the lookout for a place to build my next tree-fort.

My closest friend had the perfect yard for climbing. His house was wrapped with the ideal kind of branches to nest our boyhood antics. Most daring was the pine tree that we could skinny up and then jump the short distance into his open bedroom window.

Sometimes we would climb higher than the roof where we would send our balsawood gliders for long flights across the yard. (Some you know my mother. Please don't tell her about any of this! These are secrets she does not need know!)

Trees can be pretty good friends to a growing boy as they were for me. So you might understand then why our passage from the Gospel of Luke for today meets me on both fun and familiar ground. The setting of the story is a tree.

And not just any tree: a sycamore tree. Quite often they have wide and expansive branches. If you want to see one, I think the most magnificent specimen around here is the sycamore on the banks of the Farmington River just this side of Abigail's Restaurant.

As for the man in Luke's story, who climbed the sycamore tree, we only the sparsest of facts. We know his name was Zacchaeus; which could mean some blend of "righteous" "upright" "innocent" and "clean" – any of these alone or all together.

We also know that he was a tax collector employed by the Roman Empire. This made him also a shyster of sorts – a crook with legal sanction to collect what was due with the understanding that he could skim as much off the top as his pockets could hold.

Worse, he was the chief of the tax collectors, meaning that he was not only successful at his work but the CEO of an unjust and arbitrary distribution system. He was the purveyor of a kind of domination that caused people to despise him. We can well understand.

And here's what happened next. Jesus was passing through Jericho – which was the customs and financial center at the time. Zacchaeus was desperate to see him. Tend the word: desperate.

He knew both by the hostile disposition of the crowd and his disadvantaged height that he wouldn't stand a chance of so much as a glance. So he ran ahead and climbed the best tree he could find, a sycamore tree, so he could at least see Jesus as he came by.

This is the part I love the most. Though the crowd despised Zacchaeus, Jesus was not of that persuasion. He knew his mission: to seek out and save the lost. He never looked simply at a person for what they did, but into a soul for who they are.

Jesus looked to the branches and saw beyond the exterior of the tree climber. He did not speak in disdain but extended welcome and kindness. Their eyes met just then, the windows of the soul. How do we say it? Whoever you are, wherever you are?

Then everything shifted. Everything. That's what an encounter with Jesus can do. A sea-change washed over the tax man head to toes. Jesus even dared with insistence to invite himself to Zacchaeus's home - symbolic of a whole new relationship.

More astonishing yet. Jesus did not feel the need at all to remind Zacchaeus of his slyster ways or rehearse for him the long litany of heartless days. He did not scold or badger or ream him out with conditional acceptance.

He just let Zacchaeus stand there; faced with the mirror of his own life, caught in the shadow of his lesser ways. He waited Zacchaeus out until he came to his own turning. One translation tells us "Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned but happy to the core."

Then he spoke. "Half of my possession I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone or anything, I will pay it back fourfold." And don't miss this: a genuine turning to Jesus commands an ethic that changes not only our thoughts but behaviors, too.

In the subtext, something beautiful comes clear. Coming to Jesus and being open to Jesus coming to us rarely happens uniformly in life. One size doesn't fit all and never has. There is no perfect litmus test, no metric, except for transformed lives. And you don't even have to climb a tree.

We come to Christ differently, each and every one. And for Zacchaeus, it happened just so once upon a Jericho afternoon, in some liminal moment wherein there was a slight crack in the door, enough to send him running for the best tree he could find.

Frederick Beuchner calls this story of Zacchaeus the Sycamore Gospel. Because were it not for that tree that day the life of Zacchaeus would not have changed. He changed the kind of change that is always possible. And that's why it's a perfect story for Lent.

But friends, best beware. However, wherever, whenever, this story comes near to you it could change your life. Still, if ever you want to find a perfect climbing tree to improve the sightline between you, I can help. I may not be as agile as I once was but I still have a pretty keen eye! Amen.

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