

Sermon: Peering out from the tree
June 23 2013
Luke 19:1-9

Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a Sycamore tree
for the Lord he wanted to see.
And when the Saviour passed that way, he looked up in the tree.
And he said, "Zacchaeus, you come down
for I'm going to your house today,
for I'm going to your house today."

All week long that song has been ringing in my ears!

It was a great story to hear as a child. Anyone of us could be that wee little man who wanted to see Jesus. We were all short anyway and sometimes had to climb on things to see more easily.

And I especially love this story because I loved climbing trees. And we had great climbing trees all around the house where I grew up.

I could also identify in this story with what I thought might be the fear or humiliation of being found in that tree. Just because I wanted to see, didn't mean I wanted to be seen. Trees were great for that. You could see forever between the leaves and branches, but depending on the size and denseness of the leaves – you couldn't be seen. How great is that?

Also as a child I found myself wondering if it was a good thing or not to be seen by Jesus, to be centered out by Jesus and to be told that you were the one who got to have Jesus come and stay at your house.

I'm a back row kind of person not a front row kind of person. A back row kind of person is someone who likes to observe carefully and not always be observed. So what am I doing up here? We'll get to that.

Back to the story about Zacchaeus: so I ask, what are all the different things that are going on in this story, not all of which I think I truly appreciated as a child? I don't recall as a child, how much we thought about or talked about the role of the crowd in this story. The crowd is not a fan of Zacchaeus and not impressed with Jesus' choice to go to his house. If we expand the story in concentric circles with the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus in the middle, the crowd and Jericho where the story takes place in the next circle out, and Jesus' journey to Jerusalem and his actions throughout Luke in the outside circle and then ponder how all these circles interact, the story becomes deeper and richer.

Footnote: My thoughts are based on Kenneth Bailey's work in, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*.

Moving into the second circle – the crowd and Jericho. If we think about the crowd and Jericho we have to look at this story in connection with the one just before it, the one just before it tells the story of Jesus healing on his way into Jericho. These two stories are a pair in important ways that I hope will become clear.

As Jesus approaches Jericho, accompanied by a crowd that had presumably come out to meet him from the village (according to cultural studies - that's the way people traditionally and even today welcomed honoured guests to their villages.) The welcoming party then escorts the guest, Jesus in this case, to a home of a suitable host in the village – a host where both Jesus and the host will be honoured. But along the way into the village a blind man who normally begs for a hand out calls out to Jesus, "Jesus, son of David have mercy on me," and the crowd tells him to shut his mouth. The blind man at the side of the road has no status, is not part of the welcoming party and should not be making such a ruckus in front of an important guest. And Jesus, in Jesus-like fashion, gives this man status by acknowledging him, and then, casts

the crowd in a new role by telling them to bring the man to him. The crowd does so, and in this formal “audience” so to speak Jesus asks the blind man what he wants. The man doesn’t ask for a coin, which would have been the expected request but instead asks for sight. A certain Arabic version of this story adds an imaginative gloss to the blind man’s request, “Let me receive my sight that I might see you.”

And Jesus grants the blind man his sight, saying, “Your faith has healed you.”

Then all the people when they saw it praised God. The formerly poor and oppressed blind man has been healed and restored to a new status within the community – worthy of praise for sure.

Now again, as I’ve said, according to custom, the welcoming procession should finish their journey into the town of Jericho and have the honour of hosting Jesus but as the story continues in Luke Jesus enters Jericho and is passing through it with no indication that he is going to stay and receive their hospitality. Thus begins the story of Zacchaeus the tax collector, a Jewish collaborator with their Roman oppressors – the most despised of the despised. Like the blind man, this man is not part of the crowd. Unlike the blind man, Zacchaeus is the oppressor not the oppressed.

Again according to Middle East cultural studies, Zacchaeus does a really humiliating thing – he runs ahead of the crowd and climbs a tree – a sycamore tree that was only allowed to grow 50 or more cubits outside of the town. This simply wasn't done. If you are person of any status, you don't run and you certainly don't climb trees.

When Jesus spots him in the tree, presumably the crowd has seen him too and has already had a chance to make fun of him, a sinner, a collaborator, a man they hated. Inside the town where Zacchaeus had power they couldn't have made fun of him. Outside the town – up in a tree – of all places, he was fair game. It would almost have been as humiliating as if he'd been caught on tape hanging out with crack dealers with a crack pipe in his hand. His situation couldn't have been more compromising or humiliating.

I can only imagine that the crowd stared and jeered.

And Jesus did the unthinkable. He said, I'm going to stay at your house today. Seriously? This man's role as collaborator makes him and his house defiled. If Jesus goes and eats there and sleeps there, he too will become defiled requiring ritual purification. On top of that the role of the village to choose a suitable host for him has been usurped by Jesus. Jesus chose his own host and bestowed the honour on the one he chose.

For these reasons, the hostility of the crowd shifts from Zacchaeus to Jesus. The crowd grumbles their disapproval. This is less about Zacchaeus' choice than it is about Jesus' choice. What Jesus has done is costly. Jesus has done the costly loving thing to the man everyone loved to hate. It can't be underlined less often. The most important thing that Jesus has done has been to shift the hostility from Zacchaeus to himself and restore honour to Zacchaeus, the oppressor, *by all accounts the least deserving of that honour in the village.*

Now moving out to the next concentric circle – the whole story of Jesus in Luke, just as elsewhere in Luke, the story of the two sons, commonly known as the prodigal son story and the story of the lost sheep and coins, Jesus shows us what salvation is. Jesus brings salvation to this house – as gift, undeserved. Jesus himself says here as elsewhere that he has come to seek and save that which is lost – the oppressed **and** in this case the oppressor. As a result of this encounter transformation begins to happen. At the banquet that night Zacchaeus effusively starts to talk about the restitution he will make, but this is response to gift and will require ongoing transformation and time to make right a life-time of all that he had done wrong.

So, where are **we** in this story?

Do we find ourselves identifying with the oppressed one, with the blind man on the side of the road?

Or are we hiding out in a tree, peering through the leafy branches trying to see and not be seen?

Zacchaeus was an oppressor. Can we go there? Can we identify with him?

Thinking of ourselves as oppressors might not be an easy thing to do, but I wonder what happens if we think globally? We know that in this country we consume more than our fair share of the earth's resources.

How does this compare to Zacchaeus' actions of taking and keeping more than his share of the tax? I suppose that's debatable, but our wealth relative to the rest of the world is not debatable. If one earns a net income of 41,000 per year or more – according to some online tools that puts one in the top 1 percent of the world's wealthiest persons.

Net income of 20,000 or more puts one in the top 6 percent.

Global rich list. <http://www.globalrichlist.com>

No matter where we find ourselves, many of us are wealthy in relative terms and we often use more than we need.

If we find ourselves hiding in a tree one day, will Christ take the hostility of the crowds away from us?

Will we like Zacchaeus accept being found by Jesus? Because that's really what Zacchaeus was called on to do. Everything else was gratitude and ongoing transformation.

And what about that crowd? According to the other lost and found stories in Luke like the story of the lost sheep the crowd makes up the 99 who have no need of repentance or a change of heart. Is that true in this story? Is there anyone in this story whose heart need not be transformed by Jesus' unexpected and costly demonstrations of love.

The story of Zacchaeus is a children's story and much more than a children's story.

If we hear its depths it finds a way to implicate everyone in the whole story that is unfolding for Jesus in this gospel – oppressed, oppressor, crowd or bystander. Jesus demonstrated with the things that he said, with his advocacy on behalf of the oppressed and his compassion for

everyone including the oppressor that his unexpected costly love was for everyone.

This is a children's story because the ABC's of the gospel are found here. It is more than a children's story when we realize when we're all grown up we might be implicated in parts of the story we didn't see ourselves in before.

There are times I'd still love to be hanging out in trees, seeing and not being seen (hanging out in the back row so to speak), but somewhere along the way I accepted that Jesus found me and here I am. Here we all are, giving back in gratitude and opening ourselves up to ongoing transformation.

May it be so.