

As some of you may know, I spent my early years on a fruit farm in Niagara, which meant spending a lot of my days in trees. Being the eldest in a busy farming family, I did not experience helicopter parenting. I was pretty much free to spend my summer days running barefoot in the ploughed dirt, picking wildflowers, observing caterpillars and climbing, dangling and daydreaming in the dozens of trees that surrounded me.



I loved those trees, the sweet blossoms in spring, their cool shade, the sweet fruit that formed on their boughs, the sound of cicadas hiding in the foliage, and the sap that oozed from the bark and hardened in bubbles like amber in the sunshine. I know now that that's a sign of disease in the tree, but to me they were beautiful little jewels, and I collected them.



One day in July when I was maybe 6 or 7, my mother made a supper I hated. Ham and green bean soup. I could not stand ham and green bean soup. My mother, not willing to become a short-order cook, said if I didn't have ham and green bean soup for supper, I'd just have to go hungry. And I said "Fine!"

But I had a plan.



I stomped away from the table and made my way to the back of the farm, where there was a huge old cherry tree, bigger than this because it had been left unpruned for years, and had grown high enough to put the fruit beyond the reach of our stepladders. I knew it was heavy with dark sweet cherries, that only a fearless climber could reach. So, I clambered and scratched my way up and triumphantly ate my fill. Being at the top of a leafy tree is a unique sensation. It makes you feel a bit superior, with that view, set apart, above it all, yet hidden from lesser green bean soup eating mortals below. The fruit of my climb up there was sweet -- though somehow not as satisfying as a proper meal. And as anyone who has eaten a bellyful of stone fruit will attest, there is a price to be paid for that. Being exiled from the family table, it was also very lonely. Truth to tell, if my mother had come and stood under the tree and said: "What are you doing up there? Come on down, come to the table, and I'll give you something truly satisfying," I would have been down in a second.



I imagine Zaccheus up in that sycamore tree, feeling some of those same things.

We tend to think of this story from Luke 19 as child-friendly, as Zaccheus was that wee little man, a wee little man was he. But Zaccheus was no fun character. As a tax collector under

the Roman occupation, he was, as Frederick Beuchner described him, “a sawed-off-little social disaster with a big bank account and a crooked job.” In the eyes of his community, he was no bland Canada Revenue bureaucrat. Jericho was a wealthy commercial city on a crossroads for trade, a money making centre for the Roman occupation. Under rules set down by Augustus, local private contractors like Zaccheus would bid for the rights to collect taxes in a given region; the winner would then farm out the actual work of collecting it, based on census information. As Jericho’s chief taxman, he would have been responsible for collecting a set amount, hefty enough to pay for the heavy military presence and keep the imperial machine well oiled. There was an income tax of 1 percent, 10 percent on grain crops, 20 percent on wine, fruit and olive oil, export and import taxes, and so on. Anything he and his minions collected above the set amount was theirs to keep. The inevitable consequence of this pyramid scheme was greed, corruption and coercion. The Roman writer Philo writes about the “savage, bestial” nature of tax collectors, recounting in gross detail how some would torture people too poor to pay the tax, disabled or even dying, to make an example of them. And Zaccheus had grown rich in this sanctioned racket. To the Hebrews he was the worst of the 1 per centers, something more akin to a Mafia boss wrapped up with, dare I say it, a Donald Trump, a greedy bully and proud of it, living the high life with a fancy mansion, the best food and clothes, a bevy of slaves to cater to his every desire and enough wealth to fend off public criticism. For the Jews, there was the added revulsion of paying taxes to support a pagan empire, considered a sin in itself. Zaccheus, the biggest beneficiary, would have been seen as a traitor to his own community, a

willing servant of the empire, prepared to take advantage of the system to rob his own people. No real Jew would do what he did. He may have scratched his way to the top, but it made him an outcast.

So what the heck is Zaccheus doing up in that tree?

This is a middle eastern Sycamore.

This species produces a small fig-like fruit, not the best, but eaten by the poor and sometimes fed to animals.

It’s a magnificent tree all the same -- doesn’t it just beg to be climbed?



Something must have drawn Zaccheus to the roadside that day. What might have been stirring deep in his heart and mind, even before he met Jesus? It doesn't seem like it was just idle curiosity. Otherwise, surely he'd have turned around when he saw it would be humiliating and maybe even risky to elbow his way through the crowd to the front. After all, people would probably recognize him and maybe jeer at him or rough him up. Instead, this proud, rich, aloof man hikes up his robes, runs ahead -- in a culture where running is considered incredibly undignified for an adult male -- and then, spying a tree like this one, somehow clambers up in it like a kid, sandals, flowing robes and all, and perches up high in the leaves, hoping to see without being seen, above the rabble, above it all, among the sweet figs, but so alone.

Jesus comes walking down the street with his disciples, surrounded by an admiring crowd, which expects that surely now that he's in Jericho he will speak, show off his healing powers, and stay the night in the home of a respected leader. Perhaps one of Jesus's companions -- maybe Matthew, who after all was a tax collector himself not so long ago -- notices Zacheus up there, nudges Jesus and sneeringly points out the chief tax collector, sitting up in a tree of all things.

Jesus, I imagine, smiles a little to himself and stops right below the tree.

"Yo, Zach. What in the world are you doing up there? Come on down. I must stay with you tonight."

Wait -- what? I can see Zaccheus practically falling out of the tree in shock, snagging his fancy robes and losing a sandal in the process. Outed and honoured in the same moment.

Here's where we get a bit befuddled by this story; in our culture it's a bit impertinent to invite yourself to someone's house, but in that culture and time, to be asked to serve as host to an important person is a high honour. Imagine yourself being told that Queen Elizabeth plans to sleep in your spare room on her next visit to Canada. Like that.

But the crowd is aghast, and hostile. This preacher they've put on a pedestal has just knocked himself down a few pegs, by choosing as his host the worst of the worst. A blood-sucking crook, a corrupt cog in the imperial wheel, an unredeemable traitor, they mutter. What does the rabbi want with THAT guy? They won't even take his filthy money at the temple. If we had our way, Zaccheus would be sent packing from the city, or worse. Reasoning with his kind is pointless. He's a lost cause.

Zaccheus's heart is pounding. It's not hard to imagine that for him, for a long time, life has felt pointless and empty. Greed and collaboration with the powers that be got him every material thing a person could want, but it has brought him no end of misery, isolation, shame and self-loathing. Thing is, how can he even admit this to anyone? How can he escape his own web of self-justification? How can he give up a lifetime of bad habits and accustomed comforts? Even if he manages to change, how can he be restored?

I sometimes get annoyed with the gospel writers for not telling us more.

As a newspaper editor, if Luke were my reporter, I'd be sending him back to interview Zacchaeus again, and ask him, well, what did he say to you that changed your life?

I want to know what Jesus told him, because I believe in the power of words. If we knew what he said, maybe we'd have the words to persuade the 1 per centers of our age to act more justly. To convince politicians and dictators and CEOs to stop ignoring the vulnerable and taking advantage of the powerless and ravaging Creation to enrich themselves. Because our protests, our letters, our boycotts, our votes, even our prayers, don't seem to make more than a dent.

But maybe the words didn't even matter. Because for Zaccheus, it was enough that Jesus had reached out to him with radical hospitality, hospitality costly to his reputation. Unlike the crowd, he had no wish to condemn Zaccheus -- knowing perhaps that Zaccheus had secretly condemned himself often enough -- but instead invited him back into God's fold. For Zaccheus, this is the tipping point. Leaping out of the tree he begins the leap into a new life, ready to take the bold steps necessary to restore his relationship with his community and with God.

It's his 'come to Jesus' moment. Note though that there is no phony-sounding apology here, as we typically hear from public figures caught with their fingers in the cookie jar. In fact, there are no words of confession or repentance at all, but a pledge of serious, self-sacrificing action. Scholars are divided on how to interpret the Greek here. Some translations put these words into future tense - I'm going to do this. The NRSV comes closer to the original which is in the present tense: "I am giving half of my goods to the poor, and whomever I have cheated, I will pay back four times what I took." It's possible that Zaccheus has already quietly begun the work of restitution, though his community has yet to hear of it. But what he promises goes well beyond what Leviticus prescribes for restitution, which was a 20% premium over the value wrongly taken. He will give 400%. And it is this sincerity of action that Jesus recognizes as a true conversion: "Today, salvation has come to this house," he says. The NRSV translates it: "Today liberation has come to this house, for Zaccheus is living as a son of Abraham." He is free of his old self, he is back in the family of God's children, and oh, what joy.

"For the son of Man came to seek and to liberate the lost," says Jesus. For him, there can be no lost causes.

Where do we see ourselves in this picture?

I don't know about you, but I find myself most easily amid the crowd, proclaiming that some people are simply irredeemable. I find it much easier to see a homeless person on the sidewalk as part of God's family than I do the CEO who pays poverty wages in the name of shareholder profits, or the politician who makes policies that make it hard for refugees to find safety in this country.

I feel a bit convicted here. I'm a Jon Stewart fan. I love a good truth-telling satirical takedown of the high and mighty, who come up short morally. Righteous anger has its place, I think.

But in proclaiming that he has come to seek and to save, free, liberate the lost, Jesus proclaims the work of bringing those on the margins back into the center - and that includes secretly

repentant tax collectors. It's interesting that just one chapter back in Luke, there's another tax collector. Jesus tells this parable:

Two men, a Pharisee and a despised tax collector, walk into the temple. Once inside, the Pharisee stands up and prays: "God how I thank you that I am not on the same level as other people -- crooks, cheaters, the sexually immoral -- like this tax collector over here. Just look at me! I fast not once but twice a week, and I faithfully pay my tithes." Over in the corner, the tax collector begins to pray, but he won't even lift his eyes to heaven. He pounds on his chest in sorrow and says, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' Now, imagine these two men walking back down the road to their homes. Listen, it's the tax collector who walks home clean before God, and not the Pharisee, because whoever lifts himself up will be put down and whoever takes a humble place will be lifted up.

It is with that story ringing in their ears that the disciples witness this encounter with Zaccheus, mindful that Jesus's purpose is to bring healing to those who are spiritually sick -- and that God may perceive things in a person's heart that the crowd misses entirely.

What does it say to us who are called to be Jesus's hands and feet in the world, about our approach to those who wield, and misuse, power and wealth. There is a time, surely, for protest, boycott, letters and always prayers. But can we also find it in ourselves to extend radical hospitality to those who seem to have abandoned justice and mercy in their pursuit of power, fame or fortune, and in the process withdrawn themselves from ordinary human community. What would that kind of hospitality look like? To whom would we direct it? Can we be invitational without being co-opted and sullied, as the crowd believed Jesus would be by associating with Zaccheus. Would it even work?

Perhaps there is an echo of this in the backlash that came to Mennonite Central Committee a few years ago over its work to build dialogue with Iranians, including clerics from the Imam Khomeini Institute. A public meeting in K-W even brought out protesters. What are these Christians doing offering hospitality to representatives of this hostile and violent regime, so antithetical to what we believe? You're naive, you're being used, said detractors. In many people's minds, this sullied MCC's reputation. But today there is a diplomatic agreement that we hope means future peace, a softening of the regime and improvement of life for ordinary Iranians, and restoration of Iran to the global community. Can we dare to believe those small efforts at hospitality and conversation may have had an impact?

I also think of a young filmmaker named Jeremy Seifert, who was part of the Pasadena Mennonite congregation that Jeff and I used to attend. A few years ago, he made a prize-winning documentary called Dive!, about his young family's efforts to live for a year mostly on food scavenged through dumpster diving, which was nominally illegal. Yes, that sounds awful, but it turned out to be not only healthy but revealing. The film chronicles how much food goes wasted in North America, an astounding 40%, while the poor go hungry, partly because food is dumped the instant it hits the best-before date, even though it's still perfectly safe, or because it doesn't look perfect. Jeremy then made attempts to persuade Trader Joe's, a California-based boutique grocery chain in the U.S. with a big following among the organic/foodie/ environmentally conscious crowd, to live up to its image and create a company-wide policy to stop throwing tons of good food into its dumpsters. The dumpsters he'd often fed his children from.

This wasn't an overnight conversion; it wasn't until after the film was finished that he could even get a meeting with top executives. But I believe something did happen in those conversations, as Jeremy, a bearded young Mennonite guy with two young kids and a lot of experience rooting around in garbage, called the executives of Trader Joe's back to their own humanity, to their deeper values and beliefs, to be truly a part of the community.

Today, every Trader Joe's store in the country has a Donation Coordinator, whose job is working with local food banks and soup kitchens, seven days a week. Last year, the company donated more than \$295 million worth of food to feed the hungry. And recently, Trader Joe's former president Doug Rauch, now the CEO of something called Conscious Capitalism, opened his own new venture, a store in an inner-city Boston neighbourhood that sells overstock food that would otherwise have gone to waste, some of it prepared as meals on site, sold at deep discounts to people who most need good, inexpensive, nutritious food. Tackling hunger and food waste at the same time. It's called Daily Table.

Is that a Zaccheus story? Maybe.

How DO we see ourselves in this story?

Perhaps, if we are sometimes a part of the condemning crowd, and sometimes, walking in step with Jesus in calling others to freedom and community, we are also sometimes Zaccheus ourselves. We are, after all, part of the global 1 percenters, sitting up in that tree, materially comfortable but sometimes secretly longing to be liberated from our bad habits, our laziness, our addictions, our brokenness, our pride, our stinginess, our privilege, our negativity, our busyness, our care-lessness, or simply from being stuck in patterns of thought and action that keep us from being the faithful people, the loving, just, generous, humble, whole people we want to be. We are sitting in that tree, afraid to take the bold steps we know are necessary to be liberated, looking down longingly, not sure how we can be restored.

Jesus is calling to us, too. Yo, Doreen. Yo, John. Yo, ... What in the world are you doing up in that tree? Come down right now. I must stay with you tonight.

When Jesus comes home -- comes home -- with us, change is inevitable. Will we take the leap? Will we be satisfied with paltry fruit that doesn't satisfy, or enjoy the banquet God has for us? Will God be able to say to each of us, "truly, today liberation has come to this house?"

May it be so. Amen.