



Luke really doesn't like tax collectors or rich people. Once again the main character in the Gospel other than Jesus is a tax collector. We've moved up the social ladder from the tax collector praying in the Temple next to the Pharisee to a chief tax collector. This time we have a name: Zacchaeus.

The story is familiar to those of us who spent time in Sunday School as children: Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he. This passage is interesting for naming the main character and also for including his stature. Zacchaeus didn't get his power and prestige because he was a big burly man who intimidated others because of his size. It was his profession that caused people to pull away from him. People didn't want to associate with Zacchaeus so one might think he could simply have pushed his way through the crowd to get in a front row to see Jesus as Jesus walked by. But Zacchaeus climbed a tree. Something a child or young person might do – I suspect most of us adults are no longer climbing trees. So, a bit unusual for Zacchaeus, a person of authority, to do something unexpected like climbing a tree. Zacchaeus's need was great – to see Jesus – and so he threw his dignity out the window and climbed the tree in order to see Jesus.

It's also not the first time the Bible references a sycamore tree. One of the passages you may be familiar with is when Amos protests against being a prophet by saying "I am no prophet, or a prophet's son, but I am a herdsman and a dresser of sycamore trees..." (Amos 7: 14). We often refuse to hear God's call altogether or if we do hear it we often respond with essentially: I'm busy. I'm important. Go away. God doesn't care what is on our "to do" list or what we do for a living. God cares that we seek God and that we will, when necessary, throw away our dignity and climb a tree so that we can get closer to Jesus and the message that Jesus brings to us.

Zacchaeus climbs the tree so he can see Jesus. And Jesus sees him. Really sees him. Calls on Zacchaeus to come down from the tree and lead Jesus to Zacchaeus's house in order that they might spend time together. And Zacchaeus does what Jesus asks, coming down out of the tree and standing before Jesus. We're told that Zacchaeus was happy to welcome Jesus.

Not surprisingly, the crowd began to grumble. When our expectations are not met, we complain. When we think someone else has gained at our expense, we murmur. Why not me? Why is Jesus going to be with Zacchaeus, a sinner, and not me, one who follows the Torah? It's not fair! Jesus loves to unsettle those around him by doing what is unexpected. To reveal to us and those around us that God loves everyone, even the sinner.

Note that when Zacchaeus comes down from the tree, he stands before Jesus. Head not bowed in contrition but looking Jesus straight in the face. Not arrogantly but honestly and straightforward. Zacchaeus knew who he was. He knew that Jesus knew him and so Zacchaeus could stand before Jesus with confidence that Jesus saw him, warts and all.

Here's where our translation offers us one way of considering this text and another reading of the Greek offers us something else to consider. We read in the New Revised Standard Version, the translation of the Bible that we use in our Scripture inserts, that Zacchaeus "will" give half of his wealth to the poor and repay any he has defrauded four times as much. The Greek word permits another translation. If we go with the alternative reading, then Zacchaeus says to Jesus: I give half of my possessions to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone, then I pay back four times as much. The difference is the future tense: I will give.... I will pay vs. the present tense I give and I pay. The latter reading reveals something for us to consider. If Zacchaeus is already giving and paying, then Zacchaeus becomes a much more likeable person and less of an easy villain. The fact that he is a tax collector has much less importance because Zacchaeus is already living the teachings of the Torah and in fact exceeding the reparation required. Leviticus requires repayment of the debt plus 1/5.th Zacchaeus is paying the amount owed plus 1/4th. When we consider the alternate reading of present tense, then Zacchaeus standing before Jesus makes some sense. He does not need to kneel and show contrition for he is already living in a way that goes beyond what the Torah requires. Zacchaeus is giving of God's abundance from what has been given to him.

It is easy for us to look at the outside of someone: their appearance, their house or their cars, their profession, and make snap judgments. We are often wrong when we do that. It takes time to get to know someone to make a more informed judgment. Too often we feel pressured and harried and say "I just don't have time." Jesus has time. Jesus takes time. Jesus looks us in the eye and asks us: "Who do you say that I am" and "how are you living in response to the good news?" Jesus came to seek out and to save the lost. For that we give thanks to God each and every day of our lives. **Amen.**