

Conley Memorial Presbyterian Church, 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday After Pentecost, October 16, 2016

**Getting a Better View of Jesus**

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Luke 19:1-10

Do you remember the children's Sunday school song:

*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 Savior passed that way  
He looked up in the tree,  
And said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down!  
For I'm going to your house today!*

You might have sung this when you were little but, if so, I suspect that you didn't understand what it was all about.

Zacchaeus may well have been the most hated man in all of Jericho. He was the chief tax collector, a Jew who worked for the Romans. As the chief tax collector he likely had many people working for him who went out and collected taxes, bringing him what they collected, less whatever they put into their own pockets. Rome would tell Zacchaeus how much in the way of taxes to collect and, if less than that had been brought in, he would send the tax collectors back out to get more. Then once the goal was met, Zacchaeus would keep anything extra.

That was quite a system --- no laws which specified the taxes you had to pay, just someone knocking on your door and taking as much from you as they could get. The comic strip "Hagar the Horrible" often uses this theme. Tax collectors from the king come and take as much as they can. Hagar complains but there is nothing he can do about it.

We complain about the IRS but they at least have rules which they follow. Tax collectors in Judea had no rules other than to take as much as they could get. Is it any wonder that they were hated and that Zacchaeus was hated most of all?

Zacchaeus was short of stature according to our scripture reading --- “a wee little man” according to the Sunday School song --- but he knew that he was a sinner. He heard that Jesus was coming to town and wanted to see him, perhaps hoping for forgiveness --- forgiveness that he would never receive from the people of Judea.

He didn't dare join the crowd which was waiting for Jesus. If he had tried he could have been attacked and beaten so he went down the road ahead of where the crowd was gathering and climbed a sycamore tree to watch and wait for Jesus. It was not the kind of sycamore tree we know but was a shorter tree with wide branches which is easy to climb, and climb he did sitting there to await Jesus.

Now Zacchaeus was a wealthy man but was unhappy and alone. He had every material thing that he could hope for but not love and friendship. He was despised and hated by everyone.

If he tried to join the crowd to wait for Jesus he would have been pushed and shoved, punched and kicked and, at best, *would be black and blue and bruised, so he waited in a tree. As William Barclay<sup>(1)</sup> said, “Things were not easy for Zacchaeus but the little man had the courage of desperation.”* No one would help him, and he was desperate for forgiveness, but would the people forgive or would Jesus forgive him, or even see him up in that tree?

It wasn't likely that anything he did would gain forgiveness from the people. They were totally unlikely to forgive a tax collector even though they too were sinners. Zacchaeus was judged as being unredeemable.

Last June Pope Francis gave a sermon about being judgmental telling people to look at themselves in the mirror and to stop being hypocrites. He asked, “... *how does the Lord look at us then, when we do this? One word ‘hypocrite.’*”

The people were hypocrites --- they were sinners and were judging Zacchaeus, a man who wanted to change --- to be forgiven. Pope Francis said, “*Being judgmental belongs only to God, to Him alone.*”

So here we have a large crowd of hypocrites and sinners waiting along the road for Jesus. The most hated man in Judea is waiting behind them in a tree. Who does Jesus single out --- Zacchaeus.

Jesus doesn't judge him at all. He calls out to him and tells him to come down,

and he says that he wants to stay at Zacchaeus' home. The crowd didn't like that at all. Jesus was going to stay in the home of a sinner who they hated --- a man who had no redeeming value at all in their eyes. They were being judgmental but Jesus was not. He was being forgiving.

Zacchaeus intensely desired to see Jesus and risked ridicule, embarrassment and physical harm. He likely had heard that Jesus was a friend of tax collectors and sinners and wanted to meet him. Fred Craddock <sup>(2)</sup> said, *"Whether or not he had found the personal, social, and religious price of his wealth too high, we do not know. What we do know is that he extended hospitality to Jesus, and as a result of their meeting goes beyond the law's requirement for restitution [to those he had cheated] ... Zacchaeus' offer of half of half of his possessions to the poor and a generous restitution to anyone he may have cheated can be seen as ... evidence of the radicality of grace and the power of Jesus' good news to him ..."*

*"Luke 19:1-10 is therefore a story of the salvation of a man who was rich ... and a tax collector. His life-style and the resultant treatment by community and synagogue had not moved him beyond the reach of God's seeking love."*

*"... Jesus' visit to Zacchaeus' house was not a delay or a detour on his journey to Jerusalem; this was and is the very purpose of the journey. 'The Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.'"*

Our Daily Bread (February 23, 2016) said, *"We can be prevented from seeing Jesus. Pride can blind us from seeing Him as the Wonderful Counselor. Anxiety keeps us from knowing Him as the Prince of Peace. Hunger for status and stuff can prevent us from seeing Him as the true source of satisfaction --- the Bread of Life."*

*"What are you willing to do to get a better view of Jesus?"*

**Amen.**

(1) William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke, rev. ed., Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1975.

(2) Fred B. Craddock, Luke, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990