

## **Going Out on a Limb**

November 7, 2010 / Commitment Sunday

### **Scripture: Luke 19:1-10**

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19:1 He entered Jericho and was passing through it.

19:2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.

19:3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.

19:4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

19:5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

19:6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

19:7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

19:8 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

19:9 Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.

19:10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

### **Proclamation of the WORD**

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The story goes that a public sinner was excommunicated and forbidden entry to the church as was the practice in years gone by. The man takes his woes to the Lord.

"They won't take me in, Lord, because I am a sinner."

"What are you complaining about?" says God. "They won't let me in either."

The word of God today is about Jesus' mission.

In his own words, Jesus says, "The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost." Jesus came not to call the righteous but sinners. To whom has the church forbidden entry and full fellowship with God?

The grumbling crowd gets in the way of sinners coming to Jesus. Zacchaeus could not see Jesus for the crowd. Sometimes we, the church, get in the way of sinners coming to Jesus. Through our Christian History the church has killed in the name of right belief not unlike fundamentalist religious extremists today. Sometimes we have fenced the Lord's Table or service in the church, setting up a boundary where only certain ones can

participate. Twenty years ago, you would have rarely seen a woman in the pulpit or serving as elder even though our polity permitted it.

But most of us do not want to associate with Zacchaeus. He is a real sinner.

What had he done to be a despised sinner? At first glance the answer is that he steals from and taken advantage of people to his own benefit. He is short in stature and short on morals. He had committed white collar crime. Oh it was legal what he had done, but he had used the system to his own gain at the expense of others. He was not only a tax collector. He is the Chief Tax Collector and rich because of it. Think corrupt sub-prime mortgage agents on steroids. Think local insurance agent- broker cooking up a Ponzi scheme down the street, stealing from his friends and fellow church members, now sitting in Federal Pen.

But a deeper look reminds us that his larger crime is forgetfulness.

Zacchaeus has forgotten that he is a child of the covenant, a Son of Abraham. He's thrown out his ethics in exchange for greed and personal interest. He is lost in his quest for mammon or wealth. He suffers from amnesia.

He has forgotten who he is and to whom he belongs- not to the kingdom of Rome, his employer, but to the Kingdom of God.

He has forgotten that he does not have to trust in the security of money, but in the security of God's grace and mercy.

He has forgotten that his behavior and ethics offend God and bring upon him real consequences. He had become a social parasite, feeding off other people- using his position of privilege to bring harm and cheat other people.

But Jesus reminds him who he is and claims him as a Son of Abraham. It is Jesus who initiates making Zacchaeus right, not only with God, but with the public, the community. Jesus does not just remind him that he is a son of Abraham. He elicits a response of restitution and making right....justification. Zacchaeus will pay back what he has stolen four-fold...as required in the Law. If you steal a sheep from someone, you are required to return four sheep for your crime. And the Law protects the most vulnerable: the widow, the orphan, the poor. Zacchaeus will launder his dirty money by giving it away. Zacchaeus not only has a change of heart, he will do the right thing.

Jesus offends the crowd precisely because he will go into Zacchaeus home and eat with him- an act of intimacy and friendship. To be invited into a Jewish home for a meal is to enter into a relationship, a friendship with a person. Jesus befriends a sinner and enters into a relationship with a most corrupt sinner, Zacchaeus. I can picture Zacchaeus with a new t-shirt, "Jesus is my BFF!"

Once so desperate to see Jesus he had to climb a tree, he finds that he can now really see. He can now see the depth of his corruption and the need for healing mercy. He was lost but now is found, was blind, but now can see in the light of Jesus' love.

Today we remember that Jesus came to save sinners like Zacchaeus and like you and me. In Baptism we remember who we are and whose we are. I don't remember my Baptism. I do know that Rev. Ian Inglis, a Scotsman, baptized me in the Honea Path Presbyterian Church. I know he said these words: Laura Catherine, child of the covenant, I baptize you in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Just like Martin Luther did each morning, you and I can place our hand upon our heads and repeat, "I am baptized." No matter how independent, self-sufficient we are, we remember that we do not belong to ourselves, but to God Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth and to our Savior Jesus. And no matter what this day may bring, we know that God can re-member us or put us back together when life is falling apart or when sin clouds our choices and ethics. We will remember our Baptism today. What happened on the day of your baptism is not a formula of words, but a claim upon your life. It is a claim that you and I belong to God and in response, we make covenant promises in return when we are able to respond to the undeserved grace of God. Before you and I are able to make commitments to God, believers in the fellowship of faith, make them on our behalf. We remember that Jesus wants to come into the house of your heart and become friends- a deep and abiding friendship.

### **What is your only comfort in life and in death?**

That I am not my own but belong — body and soul, in life and in death — to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with His precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to Him, Christ, by His Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him.

*from the Heidelberg Catechism Q/A 1*

I have been hanging out with Zacchaeus this week. I have come to love him more. I admire his tenacity and ingenuity. I picture how foolish he must have seemed, a grown man running to climb a tree like a child wanting to see the parade. I imagine his desire to have his sins washed clean, the desire to be made new and free of the corruption that binds his heart and causes people to hate him. I admire his passionate commitment shown forth in his actions to make things right with his neighbors.

My mother was my best cheerleader. She used to say, "Go out on a limb. That's where the fruit is!" In other words, seeking, perseverance, effort, not matter how foolish one looks, reaps its own rewards- fruit! And the fruit that Zacchaeus reaps is a clean conscience, but more importantly an intimate friendship with the Living God. We need those kinds of friendships earthly and divine. I know my best spiritual friends make me a better person, a better Christian. Salvation, in the person of Jesus, comes to his house and eats with him. He is set free and is given a clean heart! Now Zacchaeus is wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him. Are you ready to go out on a limb for Jesus?