

Up a Tree

Craig Atwood, HMC November 2, 2025

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

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." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

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

Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Introduction

When I was a boy, I loved to climb trees. With a name like Atwood, I guess trees and forests are in my blood. I was skinny and almost fearless in those days. There was one tree next to the house that had three branches that made a nice little seat, and I would climb up with a book and sit for hours reading. I especially liked it when I could climb higher than the roof of the house and see the world from a different perspective. By the way, my parents practiced what is now free-range child rearing so I had a lot of freedom to roam.

The lot next to ours was heavily wooded with oak trees that were more than a hundred years old. One late autumn day when I was maybe thirteen, I was finally tall enough to grab the lowest limb of the tallest tree. I pulled myself up and stood on the large limb, and then I grabbed a higher limb. Working my way around the tree I went limb by limb farther and farther up. My arms and face were scratched by the bark as I hugged the trunk feeling for limbs strong enough to hold me. Eventually I got to a place where the trunk itself was so thin that I could feel the tree swaying in the wind, but I had climbed higher than most of the trees nearby. I looked around, and I could

see the Wachovia Building about six miles away. All of southern Forsyth County lay before me. It was exhilarating, and rather frightening.

Then I slowly, carefully climbed down. It was harder to come down than to go up and I was glad no one was waiting for me on the ground. I put my foot on a dead limb that broke under my weight and then I slid down to a lower branch clutching the trunk in my arms until I found my footing. For a terrifying minute I thought was going to fall the whole way to the ground, but I found a limb to hold on to. I inched my way down until finally I could drop the final six feet to the fresh leaves on the soft ground. Shaking from fear and exertion, I lay there until I could breathe normally again. I knew that I would be in trouble when my mom saw my torn clothing and scraped skin, but it was worth it. It had been a hard climb, but it was transformative.

Sunday School

Our gospel lesson for this morning is about a man named Zaccheus who climbed a tree and experienced a change in perspective that transformed his life. I loved this story when I was in Sunday School not only because I love climbing trees. It was also because of the song we learned to sing. Zaccheus 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.

As a child, the most important thing about Zaccheus to me was that he was short and couldn't see over the crowd that had gathered to see Jesus. We kids knew what that was like. When everyone stood up to sing in church, we couldn't see the preacher even when we stood on our seats. All we saw was just rows and rows of people's backs. At that time, I thought that the point of the story was that Zaccheus found a solution to the problem of being short. As we know from Randy Newman's song about short people, they are often overlooked in society.

Zacheus

But there is so much more to this little story than that. Zaccheus was a wee little man, but he was not a child. Luke tells us that he was a wealthy and important man. Last week we heard about a tax collector praying in the temple. Zaccheus was not just a tax collector; he was the boss of tax collectors. Zacheus was wealthy enough to hire other people who worked for him collecting taxes, and, if necessary, threatening people who said they couldn't pay. Zaccheus was rich. Like many rich people today, he was probably born rich, because he would have needed political connections to become a

chief tax collector. Zacheus was one of those men who was born with advantages and used those advantages to add to his wealth and status.

As I mentioned last week, the only way to get rich as a tax collector in the Roman Empire was by collecting more money for taxes than the empire demanded. The people working for Zacheus lived in fear of missing their quotas because they knew he could take their homes and have them arrested.

Zacheus was a wee little man, but people feared him, envied him, and many hated him. The Romans he worked for treated him with contempt because it was a Jew and the the Jews viewed him as a collaborator or even a traitor for working for the Romans. Zacheus was wealthy, but he was lonely. The friends that he bought with his wealth and status were not the kinds of friends a person wants to have. Zacheus was small in stature, but he was a big man in Jericho. Yet he was not happy.

Jesus in Jericho

And then Jesus came to Jericho. You may not have noticed this, but Luke's gospel is organized geographically. For months now we have seen Jesus slowly walking from Galilee to Jerusalem with his disciples and the women who supported him. He does not stay in any place for long, but keeps moving toward his goal, toward Jerusalem, toward Gethsemane, toward Golgotha. As he walks from town to town, word about his deeds spread. By the time he got to Jericho, Jesus was becoming a bit of a celebrity. Luke tells us that people came to see the famous prophet and miracle simply because he was famous. There was buzz about Jesus.

Zaccheus joined the throng of people who wanted to see Jesus, but the crowd was too large. Despite his wealth and powerful connections, no one in the crowd was willing to help Zacheus the tax collector get to the front to see Jesus. No friend said, "come up here with me so you can see." Zacheus grew frustrated and desperate, and then he saw a sycamore tree with limbs low enough to the ground that he could climb up like a schoolboy on a sunny autumn afternoon.

Zacheus wanted to see Jesus so badly that he lost his dignity. He made a spectacle of himself running down the street and swinging his legs up into a tree. The chief tax collector looked like a madman sitting in that tree, but for once in his life Zacheus didn't care that people were pointing at him and laughing at him. No doubt it was the reaction of the crowd to Zacheus's shenanigans that attracted Jesus' attention. Jesus looked to see what people were pointing at, but he didn't join in the laughter and

ridicule. Jesus looked at Zacheus and saw more than his foolishness. He saw Zacheus looking at him through the leaves with his eyes pleading with Jesus for mercy.

Come Down

Jesus didn't ask Zacheus why he was sitting in a tree. He knew. He didn't ask Zacheus why he was so eager to see him. He knew. Before Zacheus could tell Jesus what he wanted, Jesus spoke. Jesus told him to climb down out of the tree because he was going to stay at Zacheus's house that night.

Zacheus climbed down with his expensive clothes torn and stained green from the leaves. His soft hands that were accustomed to counting coins were scraped and bloodied. But none of that mattered because Jesus was with him. Zacheus's heart was beating loudly, but it was his emotional heart that had changed in the twinkling of an eye. When Zacheus came down from the tree, he saw the world from a new perspective. He no longer needed to prove to people that he was an important man whom they should respect and fear. His wealth and political connections no longer mattered to him. For the first time since he was a boy on his mother's knee, someone looked him in the eyes and loved him.

Joyful restitution

And Zacheus responded to Jesus' words with joy. Zacheus welcomed Jesus into his home and into his heart. He welcomed Jesus as teacher and healer, as lord and savior. And then Zacheus did something more extraordinary and scandalous than climbing a tree. He declared before many witnesses that he would give half of his possessions to the poor. Notice that he didn't offer gifts to Jesus. He knew that the best way to show love to Jesus is to provide for the poor people whom Jesus loves. We should remember that this week as our neighbors are losing their food stamps.

Contrast Zacheus's conversation with Jesus with the response of the rich young ruler whose story appears in the previous chapter of Luke. You may remember that the rich young man had asked Jesus what he should do to inherit eternal, but when Jesus told him to sell his possessions and give to the poor, the rich man walked away sadly. But the wealthy tax collector Zacheus did not even ask what Jesus wanted what he should do. He freely, joyfully, and generously gave half of what he owned to those who owned nothing.

But that wasn't all. He promised to make restitution to the people he had exploited and stolen from through the years, including the people who worked for him. He would pay **four** times what he had stolen. Unlike wealthy corporations today, Zacheus's lawyers didn't go to court to minimize his liability and reduce what he owed. Zacheus promised to restore abundantly. And this restoration wasn't even painful for Zacheus. He was overwhelmed by joy and willingly relieved himself of the burden of his ill-gotten wealth. Zacheus welcomed Jesus into his home and embraced a new and more joyful life as a disciple of the Lord. Two thousand years later, we remember his name.

Restoration

October 31 was Reformation Day when we remember Martin Luther's bold proclamation of salvation by faith alone. It is a powerful doctrine that lies at the heart of Protestant teaching, but too often it has been used by people to avoid taking responsibility for their actions. This story of a tax collector sitting in the tree reminds us that salvation is more than the experience of being forgiven for our sins. Justification means that we are brought into right relationship with God *and* our neighbors. Zacheus's restoration began when Jesus told him to climb down out of the tree, but it was not complete until Zacheus freely and joyfully repaired the damage he done to others. His restoration was complete when he joyfully gave up much of his wealth and paid restitution to victims of his greed.

The Moravian Church has always taught that faith must be completed in love. It is not enough to confess our sins and accept Jesus as our Savior, we must love Jesus and love those whom Jesus loves. Salvation means that we turn away from greed and selfishness and become generous, especially to the poor. Just think what would happen in the United State today if more people responded to the good news of Jesus Christ the way Zacheus did.

It is not enough to climb above the crowd to see Jesus more clearly. It is not enough to hear Jesus' call to come to him and to welcome him into our hearts and homes. We need to do what we can to make amends for harm we have done and be generous in our care for those who need our help. May each of us, in our own way, respond joyfully to the love of God shown in Christ Jesus. Amen.