

WHEN YOU CAN'T SEE JESUS

Sermon, October 31, 2010

Texts: Isaiah 53:1-6; Luke 19:1-10

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he." How many of you know and/or remember that song from your Sunday School days? *"He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see. And as the Savior passed him by, He looked up in the tree, And he said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down; For I'm going to your house today, for I'm going to your house today.'"*

Jericho was a thriving trade city located in between the Middle East and the Far East. It was a gateway for all the commerce that would pass through from one to the other; an awful lot of trade passed through that city. If you were in the tax-collecting business, it would be hard to find a better place to set up shop than in Jericho.

Most of the revenues collected from the taxes went to the Romans. Rome, though, had discovered it was far more profitable to have the locals collect their taxes in the different places of the empire. So in Palestine, various Jews would bid for the opportunity to purchase the tax "franchise" in their area. Anything extra they could collect for themselves after collecting Rome's portion of the taxes they could keep as their own income; this was permitted under Roman law.

In a prosperous place like Jericho there would be a lot of customs centers and a lot of tax collecting. They were all organized under the one chief tax collector of that city, who would take a cut from all of the extra revenues of the men beneath him who were out in the booths ... sort of like a cross between the IRS and Amway. We know from secular historians there were several layers of this tax bureaucracy. Each person would take a "cut" from the man who was beneath him. The person who was at the very top of this "pyramid" in Jericho was the wee little man in the song, Zacchaeus. He was not well liked by his own people. Not only was he responsible for collecting money to give to the occupying Romans, but he made a lot of money working this corrupt system that was ultimately paid for by the working stiffs who had to give so much just to pay off the bureaucrats, let alone Rome.

One day word spread through Jericho that Jesus was coming into town, in fact, according to what everyone was saying on the street (and as we can read in Luke 18), He had just healed a blind man at the city gate. People began pouring out into the streets in order to greet or see Him. Zacchaeus, apparently intent on seeing Jesus, was unable to do so. Why? Because he was short, we are told. But are we told that? If you look it up in the Greek, you find that one really can't tell who is the short one ... it's very possible that Jesus was the one being referred to. It really is unclear in the Greek text! The story could be understood to read that when Jesus arrived, the crowds were thick, and since Jesus was short, Zacchaeus couldn't see him, so Zacchaeus climbed the tree ... in short (*pun intended*), perhaps Zacchaeus couldn't see Jesus because Jesus was too short, and the crowds blocked the view.

Now, with all the other good points to discuss in this gospel reading, it might seem odd to hit on this one. In spite of all the depictions of Jesus as tall, manly and good-looking we have received through the centuries as part of our Christian tradition, and in spite of our popular imagination usually depicting in culturally idealized forms, don't forget that prophetic passage of Isaiah that speaks of the Messiah as possessing no physical beauty or particular desirability that would inevitably attract us to Him. And in our culture, height *is* attractive! According to research, taller men earn more money on average than their shorter counterparts. If you're 6'2" or taller, you're likely to start a new job at a salary 12.4 percent higher than someone under six feet. According to this data, each extra inch of height is worth an extra \$600 a year on average. A 1987 survey of 1,200 MBAs showed six-footers earning on average \$4,200 more than men 5'5" in comparable jobs. 18 US Presidents have been six feet tall or higher, Abraham Lincoln the tallest at 6'4". Thomas Jefferson was nearly 6'3"; in 1801 (*the year he was elected*), the average height for men was only 5'4". It's quite possible Jesus really was short; He identified with us in so many of our frailties and weaknesses, perhaps He did so in this area as well. All short people, take heart!

Whether Zacchaeus was short or not, it doesn't really matter. Particularly in these tough economic times, perhaps we can better relate to the traditional interpretation, for we can all relate to someone who was a little short and up a tree! And our economic difficulties, our concerns, our worries can make it

very difficult to see Jesus; especially at times like this for many of us it can make be very difficult to see Hope.

Zacchaeus, though, was not in economic straits. He wasn't needy. But here he is, this prestigious, wealthy man, probably dressed in beautiful robes, scrambling up this tree so he can see Jesus. What would make him do that? Why was Zacchaeus so desperate to see Jesus? He wasn't needy, nor was he sick. He wasn't blind, like the man at the gate ...or, was he? Perhaps it's no accident that Luke first tells us about the healing of a poor man who could not see Jesus and then immediately introduces us to a wealthy man who could not see Jesus, either.

William Bennett once remarked, "*The troubles we have manifestly have not to do with the pocketbook, not with economics, but with the human heart ... the heart at odds with itself.*" I'm sure Zacchaeus had a conflicted heart; successful in his business, perhaps even hard working and scrupulous, but doing so at great cost to the welfare of others. Some of us know what that feels like, to have a heart at odds with itself. I mean, sometimes I argue with myself, and later find out that both of me were wrong! Doesn't it at times feel like our hearts have become confused, because we've attached our heart to so many different things? Some of your heart you've given to work, but work would like a whole lot more of your heart. Some of your heart you've rightly given to family, but the family would like more of the heart as well, and they do deserve it. And you feel terrible when your work keeps you away from your family. Then there's all these other parts of the heart that get divided up: the part the church asks for, and the part your friends ask for, and there's the house that need attention, and the recreational pursuit that you would love to get to and the health you have to take care of and the community service that you're doing and all of it, all of it wants more and more of your heart and time and treasure. If your heart is like mine, sometimes it feels like there's something of a dysfunctional committee meeting going on in there! It's real crowded, and everyone's pushing their way right up to the table, and it seems to be a meeting of individuals who don't really care about the needs of the other people who are at the table. When it comes time for voting on how you're going to use your time and emotional energy and resources, every committee member elbows in and says, "*Me! Me! Pick me!*" What that heart committee needs is a loving, but firm Committee Chair who will take charge, one who will help the various factions come together, one who can help bring unity of purpose and function and teamwork, one who will help the Heart Committee set priorities and become a functional "army" of one.

Then one day, Jesus walks up, as He walked up to Zacchaeus, and says, "*Come down. Come down to me.*" Until we come down to Jesus, until we allow Jesus to stay in our house, to stay in our hearts, we will never find the hope we are looking for. Until we come down to Jesus, until we come to this Savior who has come looking for us, we will never be able to find a stable chairman of the Heart Committee. . You have to let Him come to your home and take over. You have to give him the chairmanship of that committee meeting going on in your heart. When you allow Jesus to be your Heart Committee Chairman, you'll discover He is not hesitant about saying to those boisterous, demanding Committee members, "You be quiet, and you get in line, and you wait your turn and you... you are so hurtful and destructive to this soul that you need to get out of here!" That's what he did for Zacchaeus.

When Jesus simply accepted him, and said in the most natural way that he would come to his house, something broke inside Zacchaeus. It appears at that point Zacchaeus made up his mind; he was going to change his whole way of doing business, his whole way of life. Jesus had turned his life around by the simple act of inviting himself to dinner. As soon as Zacchaeus obeyed Jesus' call to have Jesus come stay with him, he was impelled to give. He blurts out, "Half of my possessions I here and now give to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone of anything, I will pay them back four times as much!" Life is going to change, and change drastically, for him.

How does one find the courage and the freedom to make that kind of life-changing choice? Only by having a new Lord take over as Chairman of your heart.

And apparently, this change in Zaccheaus really "took." Clement of Alexandria records for us that Zacchaeus went on to become the first bishop of the region of Caesarea in the early church.