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Saint Zacchaeus?
A Sermon for Pilgrim Congregational Church, UCC
November 3, 2019
Rev. Reebee Kavich Girash

Text:
Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. 3He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5When 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.' 6So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. 7All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' 8Zacchaeus 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.' 9Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

From the text Chris read: Jesus 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 Jesus.

Jesus looked up and saw Zacchaeus, a tax collector, a chief tax collector, and invited himself and his followers to dinner at Zacchaeus' house. And he was happy, even joyful, to welcome him.

In preparing for today, I kept wondering what that supper was like? And I began to imagine what an eyewitness might have remembered about Zacchaeus' life, after the day he climbed that tree. So, in the spirit of imagination, I'd like to offer an imagined eulogy of Zacchaeus, by one of his family.

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My uncle Zacchaeus, he could really throw a party, couldn't he? He learned about joyful hospitality from the Teacher. At some point or another in the last few years I think everyone in Jericho was invited to dinner at Uncle Zacchaeus' house.

But if you didn't know him back in the day, you might not realize what a change that was for him. Some of you have said to us, Zacchaeus was a saint. But he wasn't always. As we look back at his life today, he'd want us to remember that day when everything changed. Since I was there, the family thought I should be the one to tell you.

First you've got to know my uncle was a tax collector when he was a young man. This was not what Grandma wanted. She would have rather been poor than to have anyone in her family help the Romans. And she knew once he started, the temptation to act the way all the tax collectors did would become too much and he'd start cheating and stealing. And she was right, and then our whole family started getting the cold shoulder in town. Uncle Zacchaeus, he went through a real cranky phase. He'd say he was just doing his job and he would wonder why people stopped talking to him in the market.

Then came his change of heart.

For weeks he'd been talking about this teacher, Jesus, traveling around the area. There was something different about my uncle when he talked about Jesus' ideas. You could tell he was wrestling with his own life.

That morning he said to me, the Teacher is coming, let's get there early so we can see him! We got there and no one would give my uncle space to see Jesus. But he was determined and as silly as it looked for a grownup, he climbed the tree. I was a teenager, and it was embarrassing to see this grown man climb a tree. So I stayed on the ground.

You think of this beautiful, big sycamore tree as Zacchaeus' tree, but it wasn't before that day.

When Jesus got there, he looked right up at my uncle - whom he'd never met - with those all-seeing eyes. He recognized something none of us could see. Jesus looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' And Uncle jumped down like he had been given the best gift ever given - which he had. Jesus had seen him - him! - and invited himself to dinner!!

Did he change because the teacher saw him? Or did the teacher see the way he had changed? I don't know. But I know Uncle Zacchaeus was different. Joyful. Excited. Free.

He came running to me, more joyful than I had ever seen him, shouting: help me get ready, Jesus is coming for dinner! We're throwing a party! I thought that was weird because no one ever came to our house any more. But Jesus convinced them all to come. Salvation has come to this house, he said. And Jesus led the crowd to supper, which he seemed to do a lot.

And that was the first party at our house, but not the last.

Grandma was pretty happy about the change. I was pretty happy that I got some friends out of the deal.

That's when Uncle Zacchaeus reinvented his life in the way most of you remember him. He said it was time to retire from sinning and start a new chapter. He made right all the wrongs he could. He figured he'd need a new career so he did a little fishing. He'd be over at the synagogue, cleaning up and organizing things. It took the leaders a minute to trust him when he said he wanted to make sure the almsbox had enough in it but eventually he started helping with that. And every week, we had a party. You've been to those parties, you know.

For my cousins, time with Uncle Zacchaeus was time at the tree. He'd help us climb up onto one of the branches, and then he'd step back a few feet and he'd look up. He'd say to us, I want to see you the way Jesus saw me. All of us carry that grace with us, even now.

He'd climb up there himself most nights after supper, to remember what it felt like to be seen. Loved. Found.

At the end he couldn't climb the tree anymore so and we took turns sitting with him on the ground beneath the branches, remembering.

So, was he a saint? Paul sent a letter a few weeks ago and started it, To all God's beloved ... who are called to be saints. If we're all called to be saints, maybe Uncle Zacchaeus was. Maybe being a saint just means to be a faithful person trying their best to live into the grace Jesus offers us.

My uncle was complicated. A lot of folks remember him fondly, but he wasn't always the good guy. He helped the Romans and then he turned away from them and back to his community. He was poor and then he was rich and then he gave a lot away. He was hated and then he was loved. He was bitter and then he was joyful. He was complicated. But I want to remember him sitting up on the branch of that sycamore tree. So today, grown up or not, when we're all done with one more great party, I'm going to climb that tree. I want to remember Uncle Zacchaeus the way Jesus saw him: a son of Abraham, found, forgiven, loved and free. Because if he could be seen that way, so can all of us.

<https://godasagardener.com/2013/10/13/climbing-a-sycamore-tree/>

This tree in Jericho is probably not the tree Zacchaeus climbed, but people gather at this site to remember him.