

(Luke 19:1-10 NRSV)

<sup>1</sup> He entered Jericho and was passing through it. <sup>2</sup> A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. <sup>3</sup> He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. <sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

<sup>5</sup> 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." <sup>6</sup> So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

<sup>7</sup> All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." <sup>8</sup> 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." <sup>9</sup> Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

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## Called From the Unlikely

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I've always like Zacchaeus. I know what it is to be short of stature in a crowd. I admire him that he climbed a tree to get a look at Jesus. I'm not usually so bold. I may turn sideways and sneak a shoulder through a tight fit and try to move closer to the front. But mostly I miss the bottom half of things. It was years before I knew that the fireworks on the esplanade weren't all aerial. At the movies I always sit behind Arnold Schwarzenegger look-alikes and have to guess what's going on in that big chunk I'm missing shaped like a head and shoulders. At the baseball game I think I must look like I need Preparation H. Lean left for the batter, lean right when the ball reaches the outfield grass, and, darn, no place to lean to see the play at first. It's blocked by Arnold again. So, Zacchaeus is something of a hero to me. He was a short person who had the guts to climb the tree and see what he wanted to see.

But Zacchaeus wasn't a hero to those who saw Jesus invite himself to Zacchaeus' house, after calling him down from the tree. The people didn't like Zacchaeus. Maybe part of it was his brazen act of climbing above the crowd to get a view. Maybe that was a little impolite. But we soon learn that they disliked Zacchaeus for bigger reasons than his small size and its compensations.

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. Worse. He was a chief tax collector. He was fully aligned with the great machinery of the Roman Empire. He was wealthy as a result. And those who scorned him that day scorned him for those reasons.

They were there on spiritual business. Some of them had come to see Jesus, just like Zacchaeus had, because they were drawn to this man preaching in the countryside about the kingdom of God. They were interested in who this Jesus might be, and if he might be worth their attention. His fame had spread, and they wanted to see for themselves. Maybe they would find him worthy. Or maybe he would find them worthy. They came as religious seekers, with an open mind.

Others were there on a slightly different kind of spiritual business. They were skeptical about this Jesus person. For some the skepticism was born from true doubt. Was this person real? For others the conclusion was foregone that he wasn't real. Both sets of doubters felt certain they could discern the truth in these matters

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quite simply because they were religiously astute and serious people. Today they might be called upstanding folk of the church.

Both kinds of doubters, those who were sure Jesus was a mess and those who were pretty sure he was, and then even those who came with interest and an open mind, all three groups gathered there at Jericho that day saw Jesus taking up with Zacchaeus as a horrible flaw. What was he thinking of? This man was not anything like the upstanding folk of the church, was not anything like the religiously serious folk they were.

And usually this is the warning found in the story of Zacchaeus. A warning to us who are upstanding that we should understand that we judge others unfairly, and there may be others who look less deserving and less upstanding than we are who Jesus thinks are just fine to associate with, and who turn out better than we think. This is a good warning, a good message. It's probably the first level Jesus had in mind.

But Jesus is hardly ever satisfied with one level. No doubt that's why he's remained so interesting for these two millennia. His rather simple stories and truths turn out to have layer upon layer. And this one is no exception.

The first reading of the story engages our own readiness to exclude and belittle those we think are unworthy. It also engages our arrogance, our arrogance to make judgement in these matters.

But I have a feeling that Jesus is probably laughing at us when we think of it that way. I'm sure he thinks it's probably good for us to recognize our arrogance. But he's laughing because at the next layer, he's saying to us, Hey, you, get out of the tree. I'm coming to your house. I'm coming to your house because I've got plans for you.

Here we are thinking that our upstandingness has gotten us a little too big for our britches, but still thinking of ourselves as basically on the right track and in a certain way in charge. We are just a little too proud, and as we found last week, pride can get you into a lot of trouble.

But Jesus is saying to us, Maybe you're not so advanced as you think you are. Jesus sees through our skin. He knows that very often our certainty and our testiness have as much to do with our insecurity as they do with our security. We want to be right so badly that we make sure to contrast ourselves with others, like Zacchaeus as proof that we are.

But Jesus looks up at us, at you and me, and says, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

The nice part of this story is at the very moment we are asked to confront the fact that we aren't the hot shots we thought we were, the very moment we see that Jesus sees through us, Jesus invites himself over to the house. The nice thing about

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it is that we find out we don't have to be as superior as we thought for Jesus to pay attention to us.

I think as much as anything all this talk about the sinners and the tax collectors in the Gospels is meant to let us know that even if our true selves are known, Jesus is interested in us, Jesus believes in us.

And, in fact, Jesus has quite a bit in mind for us. This is where the story gets dicey again. Zacchaeus seems to have a turnaround. We don't know exactly what he was like before that fateful moment he came down from the tree at Jesus' command. But we can guess from his job description that those who scorn him aren't far wrong. He is a chief tax collector and rich, rich from taxes levied against people who were largely poor themselves. Nonetheless, Jesus comes to him. And then suddenly he changes. I will give half of everything to the poor, he says. Anywhere I have committed fraud, I will pay back the money four-fold.

Here the story pinches us again. At that first level of reading, the people grumbled because they thought they had lived as they were supposed to, they had met the demands of the religious law, and they were sure Zacchaeus had not. But now we have Zacchaeus saying he will give away 50% of his income, not just the 10% of the customary tithe. And rather than just paying people back for any fraud, he will pay quadruple damages.

When we realize, as we are supposed to, that we are meant to be Zacchaeus in this story, we may suddenly say, I'm not so sure I want this person Jesus in my house after all. 50% tithes, quadruple damages, the demands of following him are too great for me.

Of course, it's too late by now. He's already in your house, or in your heart. But before you stand trembling in front of the ATM machine ready to withdraw half your net worth, let's be sure we know what the point of this part of the story is.

In another story the rich young ruler is told that, yes, he has followed the commandments perfectly, but then Jesus instructs him to give away everything he has and follow him. In part both of these stories are meant to say that worldly wealth, and especially our attachment to it, can be an obstacle. It is an obstacle to seeing the true wealth there is in spiritual riches. So, rather flippantly, Jesus seems to say, Give it away! Easier said than done for most of us, though we all know people who have, like Mother Theresa, who seem to be the happier for having done just that. But even Mother Theresa would acknowledge, not everyone can, or should be like her.

These stories, however, get our attention. Give everything away and follow me. Give half your possessions to the poor. These are jarring thoughts. And once they have our attention they tell us something slightly different than the obvious. They tell us that we often get too sure of ourselves about what God wants of us. The rich ruler wanted Jesus to justify him, because he was sure he had followed the

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commandments fully. The crowd that booed Zacchaeus did it because they were sure that they knew what being righteous looked like, and it didn't look like Zacchaeus.

As much as anything, Jesus wanted to say to people, don't get too certain that you know what God wants. Because, if you get too certain that you know what God wants, then you quit listening for God to tell you. When all is said and done about this morning's story, the most significant thing that Jesus may be saying is, If you really want to know what God wants, you better listen and be prepared for it to be something different from what you may have thought. And to prove his point, he holds up Zacchaeus, a sinner who then exceeds what they thought God required. It's not so much what Zacchaeus did as it is that it was meant to surprise people, to show them they were operating on their assumptions about God rather than listening to God.

And this brings us full circle. The first level of the story addressed our arrogance to judge others, and often misjudge them. When we let down our defenses a little, we find that it may be ourselves, as well as others, we are being hard on, and that Jesus can and will come to us, even if we aren't as wonderful as we think we ought to be. So, we unlock the door and let Jesus in the house. We find ourselves accepted when we may have thought it couldn't be. And then we find another surprise. Jesus comes to people, like you and me, who haven't got it all together, surprise one. But, surprise two, is that when he gets there, he wants us to know that living our faith is not just a matter of meeting the standard. It is a matter listening for the voice of God to tell us something different from the standard we have in mind in the first place.

The crowd against Zacchaeus stumbled on two counts. They overstated their own compliance with the standard they had in mind, and they blindly held to the standard, failing to listen for or to God. Jesus wanted to go home with them, with us, first to accept us, but then to help us open our ears and our heart. Help us to embrace a dynamic relationship with the holy, so that they might truly represent and live a life in the shadow of the presence of God. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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