

Sermon for Nov. 3, 2019
St. Andrew Presbyterian Church
Luke 19:1-10
Rev. Rosemary McMahan

Use these words, O Lord, and make them yours. Amen.

What's Your Angle?

Recently, some clergy friends and I were discussing if any sermon can be called “new.” It’s a fair question since Christians have been interpreting and preaching the same Bible for over 2000 years. It’s akin to asking whether any fresh insight can be published about Shakespeare and his works. Or whether any new country can be discovered. It’s all been done before. We’ve all been there, read that, heard that, and preached that.

What do we do, then, with poor, short, overly-familiar Zacchaeus up in his sycamore tree? Can his story be made new? Or should we just sing along with the kids? “Zacchaeus 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.” This story has been relegated to children’s bibles, flannel boards, and Sunday School songs so often and for so long that we probably don’t bother to take it seriously anymore, to listen and see if there is any message for us “mature” Christians.

Mature Christians. Apparently, Paul wasn’t so sure that his churches were filled with “mature Christians” or he wouldn’t have written letter after letter full of reminders about living with humility in the image of Christ. Jesus’ brother, James, might have hoped that “mature Christians” already knew to hold their tongues, control their tempers, work together, and do what Jesus asked. And we might recall the “mature” Pharisee from last week’s story who was so full of his self-righteousness that he couldn’t see beyond himself. While there may not be anything new for us to discover in Luke’s story, there just might be some things we need to remember, to ponder, to reflect upon, or even repent of.

Let’s start with the little man himself. Despite being vertically challenged, and hated by his fellow townspeople because of his profession as chief tax collector working with and for the Romans, Zacchaeus had a strong desire to see this Jesus fellow. We aren’t told why. Maybe Zacchaeus was just curious about him because Jesus had become a sort of celebrity. We aren’t given any indication that Zacchaeus wanted anything from Jesus. He wasn’t hanging from the branches yelling, “Have mercy on me, Lord!” He simply had an urge to see Jesus, so much that he shoved his way through a hostile crowd and put aside his pride as a wealthy man to climb a tree. And,

guess what? Zacchaeus not only saw Jesus, but Jesus noticed him and called him by name.

“Zacchaeus, come down out of that tree.”

I like trees. As a child, I had a favorite Weeping Willow in my yard where I would go for privacy, which was needed in a large family. When I was up in that tree, I felt protected. Plus, if I climbed high enough and peered through the branches, I had a good view of what was below. I could watch the world go by and not get involved in any of it. It was a safe place.

Here in this story we find Zacchaeus up in his tree, in his safe place, above the crowds, and here we have the critical point of the story. Zacchaeus, quite possibly nudged by the Holy Spirit because the Spirit likes to nudge, *wanted* to see Jesus, and Jesus wanted to see Zacchaeus. Everyone heard Jesus invite himself to Zacchaeus' home. The Pharisees and scribes complained because Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners - even this notorious scammer and cheater, Zacchaeus. "All" grumbled, including the disciples, because Jesus' actions were obvious and public and not in keeping with the usual standards. Everybody saw. Everybody knew. Jesus saw Zacchaeus and invited him down, into a relationship. Suddenly, with the crowds looking on, Zacchaeus had a choice to make.

Considering the hostility of the crowds and their judgments against him, Zacchaeus had a choice to make. He might have preferred to stay safely in that tree. He could have said, “All I wanted to do was just look at you, Jesus. I prefer to keep my distance,” which made me wonder about our trees, yours and mine, those postures or attitudes or safe and comfortable places where we tend to reside. I don't know all the names of such trees, but some might include apathy, uncertainty, comfort, insecurity, doubt, unworthiness, guilt, disinterest, wealth, resentment, and complacency. Yet the Spirit still prompts us to look for Jesus. Like Zacchaeus, we want to see Jesus, too, don't we? After all, that's why we are gathered here this morning, but where are we located in each of our own sycamores?

Right at this moment, we are in a safe and familiar place where we know what's going to happen. It's all outlined in our bulletins. We know the people around us. We might catch a glimpse of Jesus in the scripture passages and maybe in the sermon. From our vantage points, our angles, we can decide how much we want to get involved in anything—in the worship service, in the ministry of the church, in fellowship with each other, even in a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ.

Any kind of relationship with Christ is up to us when he calls our name. No one is going to make us come down from the safety of our trees, not even Jesus. We can

stay in our trees forever, protected, unchallenged and unchanged. Too often that is the way many Christians live their lives, on the fringes as a spectator, not as a disciple willing to take a risk.

Zacchaeus had a choice to make when Jesus invited him down. He could have said, “I will come halfway down and try the waters, if you meet me halfway up.” We can make that same choice. We want to see Jesus, but on our terms. We’ll come down our tree—to some degree--but Jesus has to come up the other half. We want to know exactly what Jesus wants and what’s in it for us before we venture any closer. Will Jesus do our bidding and answer our prayers and not ask too much of us? Besides, it’s best to know ahead of time what might be expected of us if we come down from our trees. It’s much more logical, isn’t it, to come down a little bit, check things out, see if they feel right or make sense? Then, if we don’t like this relationship, we can climb right back up and watch the world go by, safe, protected, and unchanged.

Zacchaeus had a choice to make when Jesus invited him down. Zacchaeus could take a chance with those mumbling crowds, leave the tree and meet Jesus, which is what he does. The community witnessed amazing transformation when that happened. We say we want to see Jesus, too, so Jesus shows himself to us. He says, “Here I am. I am in this scripture. I am in the communion table. I am here in each one of you. *I am*. Come down out of your particular tree and get to know me. Lay aside your doubts, your guilt, your self-defenses, your walls, your apprehensions, your comforts, your likes and your dislikes, your apathy, your pride, your wealth, and anything else that stands between you and me, and come down to me, just as I came down to you.”

Zacchaeus, the tax collector, the despised sinner, the cheater, did just that; he came down, simply because Jesus noticed him and invited him, while the rest of the crowd, the “spiritually mature,” stayed in their judgmental branches, murmuring and keeping their distance. Notice that it wasn’t Jesus who judged Zacchaeus; it was the religious crowd, whose actions might remind us about judging others. It was Zacchaeus, the sinner, the least likely, who opened his home *and his heart* to the Lord. The power of being in the presence of Christ, not at a safe distance, changed Zacchaeus. He paid back not one, not two, not three, but four times what he’d stolen from people. There can be no doubt of the connection between Zacchaeus’ encounter with Jesus and his unmistakable transformation. When was the last time we could say that about our discipleship?

Perhaps some of us have had a similar experience to Zacchaeus where we heard the Lord’s invitation to meet him very clearly and we answered without hesitation. But I would guess for the majority of us, answering Jesus’ invitation to meet him is indeed like coming down a tree. We do it bit by bit, watching our footing, testing each branch, until our feet hit the ground. But however we do it, we are offered the same

choices as Zacchaeus. We can stay in the comfort and safety of our trees, or keep Christ at arm's length, or respond to his invitation of love and grace and let him into our homes and into our hearts, just as Zacchaeus did. If we truly do that, we will never be the same. The choice is ours.