

I have a confession to make. I did not attend Sunday School regularly until I was a teenager. My mother taught me Bible stories, but I missed out on some things...like flannel boards and silly little songs and memorizing Bible verses. I was teaching VBS as a college student home for the summer when I learned "Father Abraham had many sons", and I never learned the song about Zacchaeus at all. I know I've heard it...but somehow "Zacchaeus was a wee little man" becomes "Old King Cole" in my memory... "And he called for his pipe, and he called for his bowl, and he called for his fiddlers three." I suspect many of you know the wee little man song, and it's the first thing you think of when this story comes to mind. But the song only gives you an incomplete picture of what happened that day.

The song tells us that yes, Zacchaeus was anxious to see Jesus, and so he climbed a tree to see him as he passed by. And yes, Jesus saw him and called Zacchaeus to come down. But there's much more to the story than just who did what...

To begin with I think we have to get to know our cast of characters. To simplify matters, we'll identify them as Zacchaeus, Jesus, and the crowd, and ignore the disciples, who were around somewhere but don't figure in this particular encounter.

Starting from the beginning of the story, we find that Zacchaeus was 1) wealthy, 2) a tax collector, and 3) short. Having money was not, in

itself, a problem, but where he got it was. In those days, a tax collector earned his living by collecting more than he had to give back to the government...so a rich tax collector was immediately suspected of lining his pockets at the expense of his people. While Zacchaeus may have been a great person with a large inheritance from a rich uncle, the community clearly regards him as an outsider, this man who is a sinner.

And then there's the shortness. Zacchaeus was not a tall man, according to the scripture, but one wonders as well if his problems went beyond his stature...if Zacchaeus had been somewhat short-sighted in his earlier life as well. Just before this encounter with Zacchaeus, Jesus met and healed a blind man who nonetheless saw clearly who Jesus was. Perhaps Zacchaeus the short one has been unable to see past his own desires and his own profit in the past...but in this story, he's got a notion who this Jesus guy might be...and it's enough to make him risk his dignity by climbing a tree to get a better look. (Seriously—think back to pictures you've seen of the type of clothes people wore back then...could you climb a tree in that get-up?)

And then there's Jesus: the Son of Man. He's just healed a blind man and told him his faith had saved him...salvation in the fullest sense of healing his sight, making him whole, restoring his life. He's talked to a rich ruler who has followed the law all his life, but Jesus tells him,

“there is one thing lacking,” and because the rich ruler cannot bear to part with his wealth, he denies himself entrance to the kingdom of heaven. He’s just cautioned the disciples and the crowd of people around him that “whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” And before that he told a parable about a Pharisee and a tax collector in prayer: “all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

And then there’s the crowd: the people of Jericho, lined up to see this Jesus who talks so easily of the Kingdom of God and who’s in and who’s out. These presumably law-abiding, synagogue-going, God-fearing, tax-paying townspeople clog the streets, making it hard for their shorter neighbors to see their visitor. These are Zacchaeus’ neighbors, who, when Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus, muttered against them that Jesus had gone to the home of one who was a sinner.

It’s a complicated cast of characters: a short, wealthy tax collector with enough nerve to risk public embarrassment to see Jesus; Jesus himself, who seems less concerned with the establishment crowd around him than with those who will distinguish themselves from the crowd in their ability to see him as he is; and that crowd of neighbors who are not at all friends to Zacchaeus, and who would apparently rather not see Zacchaeus, the sinner, receive any kind of favor, and who are primarily concerned with sorting out who’s who...who is a

sinner, who is worthy of Jesus' attention, who is a member of their group and who is not.

That's the big question for the crowd that day, anyway, and so often for us as well: who is a sinner? Zacchaeus was a sinner, an outsider, a neighbor but not a friend, a hated collector of unjust taxes for the oppressive Roman Empire. Anyone whose wealth came from complicity with Rome was clearly a sinner, according to the crowd. Those who were outside the community because they were of a different race (like Samaritans), those who were outsiders because of illness (remember the lepers who must cry, "unclean, unclean"?), those who were born blind...aren't they sinners, too?

And how do we decide now who is a sinner...who we will keep to the outside of our fellowship, who do we, like the crowd in Jericho, want Jesus to exclude? Are we still, despite Jesus' witness, despite the Holy Spirit, despite the miracle at Pentecost and the travels of Paul, are we still seeing those whose language and customs and country are not like ours as sinners, outsiders, less than we are? Are we still wasting our time condemning the sick in mind and heart and body instead of offering the compassion and healing power of Christ? Are we still busy trying to decide who is in and who is out...who is a part of us and who is a sinner...who should receive Christ's gift of salvation, and who should not?. Could it possibly be that we see ourselves so unclearly

that we do not know our own sin? Can it be that it is you, and me, who is a sinner? Are we with Zacchaeus or with the crowd?

Zacchaeus was so moved by Jesus' fellowship with him that he (probably very carefully) got down from the tree and received Jesus as his guest in his home, and in his heart. When Jesus welcomed Zacchaeus into his "crowd", the tax collector's life was changed...and he became a new person...and he promised to return all he had obtained unjustly, and make restitution, and give half of what he had to the poor. Jesus responds by affirming that Zacchaeus is restored to right relationship with God and with his Jewish community, a son of Abraham, because he has received salvation. Now, who is a sinner? Zacchaeus is so moved that he makes restitution above and beyond whatever sin and fraud he might have committed, demonstrating that his life has been transformed by this brief encounter with Christ. Jesus responds to the crowd by making it clear that Zacchaeus' transformation is not only personal but that he has received salvation...and restoration in the eyes of God as a child of Abraham once more.

Can we rightly join the crowd and call Zacchaeus a sinner, knowing now that he was transformed by Jesus' acceptance? Can we condemn with the crowd one who Jesus does not condemn? Can we decide who is with us, and who is not, knowing that Jesus, the Son of God and Son

of Man, welcomed all who would come to him? Maybe Zacchaeus was a sinner...maybe...but he was also one who was willing to look past community and race and propriety and custom and his own flaws and failures to allow his life to be radically changed by the power of God and the fellowship of Christ. Who is a sinner? The one who condemns, or the one who seeks out new life?

Aren't we all sinners?

We are.

This encounter with Jesus is not about what the crowd wants (the sinner humbled or Jesus for themselves), or what Zacchaeus wanted (did he even know?) but about what God wants: salvation for the lost and restoration of all people into the Kingdom of God. It's not about rules...if it were, the rich young ruler might have made it and the Pharisees would have the inside track. Instead it's about transforming relationships in which the power of God in our lives drives us to changed behavior because of the goodness and mercy of God. It's not about us...it's about God in us.

This is the really great thing about the Kingdom of God, about the Body of Christ, about salvation: it's not about us. It's not about our own sins and failings, because God loves us even more than that. It's not about how we tend to clump together in groups and cliques, trying to decide who is like us and who is not, because God sees through all

of that. It's not even about who we like and don't like, how we think things ought to be: Jesus is better than that. Who is a sinner? We all are, but that's who salvation is for: not the one who is "perfect" and doesn't think he needs God, but who those who will see that I am a sinner, you are a sinner, and we all need to be transformed by Jesus Christ.

It is not about us. It's not about a desire to be a better person, to earn spiritual points to make a great show of how faithful you are. It's about being changed by the power of God, and learning to see the world just a little bit like God sees it. It's not about us...it's about the other, the outsider, the one we can welcome, can help, can love, who might not receive welcome, help, and love anywhere else. It's about the one who just might see Jesus for who he is, like Zacchaeus, if we can put our humanness aside and be the people of God. As the church, we are called to extend hospitality to all people in Christ's name, and give them the opportunity to know Jesus.

It's not about us. Have you heard it yet? Instead it's about God's love breaking into the world in radical contradiction to "the way things have always been." It's about a love so great that all our failures and inadequacies and pettiness are transformed into generosity of life and spirit...and yes, of the wallet. It's about who Jesus Christ is, and what God is doing in the world.

The reason Zacchaeus receives salvation when the rich ruler didn't is because Zacchaeus had a moment when it was about Jesus, and not about Zacchaeus. He abandoned his social stature as an agent of the government and a wealthy man and made a fool of himself climbing a tree to see Jesus pass by. He forgot to think about how it might look for him to be up in that tree...he forgot himself. In response to Jesus' presence, Zacchaeus' life was forever changed and he became a generous person, exceeding the law in his restitution and alms-giving. In that moment, it was not about him: it was about Jesus, the kingdom of God, and caring for others out of God's great love for him. It is about who Jesus is and what God is doing in the world...about the Body of Christ and the kingdom of God.

When we set conditions and limits on the body of Christ, when we create barriers of appearance and behavior, when we make ourselves the arbiters of who God likes and who God doesn't, then we are making it about us. In our often unintentional behavior toward those who are not like us: a different social class, a different way of dressing, speaking, eating, living, tattoos and piercings and hair in colors that do not occur in nature, we are excluding those whom Christ loves and has come to save. It's not about us, except when we get in the way. It's about saving the lost, whoever the lost may be. God loves people for their own sake, not because of anything we can do to

win God over or any notion we have of being loveable ourselves. This is a good thing, because very often we are not...at least not apart from the grace of God.

In coming down from the sycamore tree, Zacchaeus learned who the world is meant to be in the kingdom of God. Although his neighbors seem to have written him off as a sinner, Jesus writes no one off. In joining Zacchaeus for an evening, Jesus restores him to his people, to himself, and to God, for eternity: a complete healing, and a witness to Jericho of who this Son of Man really is. And because he climbed the tree, Zacchaeus left for us a lesson in who is a sinner, and for whom is the kingdom of God. Thank God for men and women who are willing to set themselves aside and climb trees, and to remind us, again and again, of who we are, and for whom is the kingdom of God.

Who is a sinner?

The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.

Thanks be to God.