

Show Me Jesus

Luke 19:1-10 (October 30, 2022)

by Paul Matheson

Music “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. He climbed up into a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.” Do you remember singing that song years ago, when you were a child?

I loved this song. Because, being small myself, I could identify with Zacchaeus and his struggle to see over the crowd. And also because I loved to climb trees. So this song took hold of my imagination and planted itself firmly in my repertoire of Bible stories.

It's one that appeals to children. But is that all it is – a story meant for flannelgraphs (the cutting-edge medium of my day), or story-books, or VeggieTale videos? Is it only meant for children? Or is there a message for the adults among us as well?

And *why*, you may be wondering, have I chosen this story for our 90th Anniversary celebration? The answer is that it's the lectionary reading for the day. And it's amazing to me how often this disciplined reading of scripture speaks profoundly to our present circumstance. Wherever we are in our lives, there is a Word from the Lord that is meant for us. God always has something to say. Sometimes it is new. And sometimes it is new all over again.



Before I start into any of that I want to acknowledge what a *great* day it is to be at church on this celebration of our 90th Anniversary. 90 years! It's something really. A long time. And I'm humbled to be the preacher on this day.



Even more humbling is the reality that I have not been part of this congregation for nearly as long as many of you, whose history with this place goes back how long – 10, 20, 40, 60 years? Compared to that, my time is very brief indeed. Lindsay and I have felt very welcome here. There are many things about this congregation that we appreciate. Things such as history, hospitality, fellowship, worship – music, especially. A willingness to serve our neighbours, both near and far.



Our scripture begins by introducing us to a character named Zacchaeus. And here are the things we're told about him: He was a chief tax collector. And he was rich.

Zacchaeus was no little guy, at least in some regards. He was the chief tax collector, the head honcho, the man in charge for the city of Jericho. The fact that he was also rich, well, that says plenty about how he operated. And now we're talking about some very adult things. The Romans hired tax collectors to syphon money from occupied territories.

And being rich – well that's a clue to how successful Zacchaeus was. Taking in as much as he could, by whatever means he could, perhaps using methods of intimidation and extortion. The way to get rich in this job was by raking it in and claiming any surplus as your own. It goes without saying, Zacchaeus was not well-liked by his neighbours!



When Jesus comes to town, who do you think wants to see him? There's a buzz about Jesus and the people of Jericho are eager to find out more. But look who else is there. Zacchaeus himself, in his fancy tailored clothes and gold rings, and all that his wealth has bought him. Does it surprise you to see *him* straining for a glimpse of Jesus?



The French philosopher Simone Weil said, “All the goods of this world... are finite and limited and radically incapable of satisfying the desire that perpetually burns within us for an infinite and perfect good.” What does Zacchaeus know of an *infinite and perfect good*? Zacchaeus who has no friends and is shunned by his own people. Zacchaeus who can barely sleep some nights because of his troubled conscience.



You know what happens next. He tries to push through the crowd but can't. So he sees a tree and climbs it. Like a little child, shinnying up the trunk, and hiding himself among the leaves and limbs. Now, he thinks, when Jesus passes by, I will surely see.



By Joel Whitehead

No one can say this man is not resourceful. But he also looks a little ridiculous, don't you think? A grown man up in the middle of a maple tree? You know what I think? I think Zacchaeus is desperate. He wants to see Jesus so badly that he will resort to almost anything to make it happen. I think he needs to see Jesus. And he knows it.

And here's a piece of good news for every seeker of every age, including our own. Every anxious, desperate, “gotta-see-something” person who, beneath the façade of their wealth and possessions, is really empty: We look for God. But the Good News is that God is always *already* looking for us!

Zacchaeus climbs a tree in a last-ditch attempt to see the Saviour. Then Jesus comes by. He calls to him. Zacchaeus thinks he's hidden, but he's not. Jesus knows he's there. It turns out that Jesus has wanted to see him all along! He spots him right away. “Zacchaeus,” he calls out. “Come down out of that tree!” Is Jesus cross, or is he laughing? I'd like to know. “Put the kettle on,” he says, “I'm coming to your house for tea!”



The crowd was outraged. “Jesus, what are you thinking, going to see a man like that?” We don't like it when God shows mercy to sinners, at least *other* sinners. It offends our sense of justice.

But please notice: there's something going on with Zacchaeus, something utterly miraculous! An amazing change is taking place. And all it took was Jesus saying, “I want to be with you.”

Jesus takes Zacchaeus as he is. This hollow traitor of a man. This greedy, decadent yet empty person whose life has taken more than a few wrong turns. Jesus finds him, and speaks to him. And invites himself for dinner.



And now Zacchaeus is so full of joy, so “happy to welcome him,” the scripture says, that he stands up right then and there, in front of everyone and proclaims: “Half my possessions Lord, I give them all way. And if I have defrauded anyone, I will pay it back and more. I want to make things right.”

Jesus turns to the crowd and says: See? God's salvation has come to Zacchaeus' house. Yes, even *here*! “For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” Jesus reconnects Zacchaeus with his community. Relationships already are being healed. A new kind of justice is being established upon the earth. The old order of the empire is crumbling. It cannot stand. The foundations of greed and exploitation and resentment and hostility are already beginning to fade away.

This man too, says Jesus, is a child of Abraham.



So what does this have to do with *us*, here at First Mennonite Church on our 90th anniversary?



I am struck by just how eager Zacchaeus is to see Jesus. He wants so much to catch a vision of the Lord. And that, friends, is exactly what the church is here for! We're meant to show the world who Jesus is. In the words we speak, in the things we do, in simply being who we are, we point the way to Christ.

Jesus said to his disciples: "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my *witnesses* in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (Acts 1:8)



As we celebrate our anniversary today, we look back and think of all the many things that have been accomplished through the hard work and commitment of God's people in this place. We are grateful for their service.

Thankful for the buildings, the programs, the thriving Sunday School – I see this attendance board in front of the pulpit and I am amazed how many children this church has influenced!

Did they see Jesus? That is the question for us. The one question we are responsible to answer. It matters *not* whether our numbers are large or small. What matters is whether we are faithfully, prayerfully, consistently pointing the way to Christ. So that people like Zacchaeus can see.



Andrew Root is a Lutheran scholar and a prolific writer. In his latest book titled "Churches and the Crisis of Decline" he talks about the challenges we face: The culture wars that swamp us, the fatiguing pace of change in our world, the challenge of God language in a culture that is increasingly secular in outlook.

He says the church is "not the star of our story." Did you hear that? The church is *not* the star. We are here to point the way to Jesus: "The church has its ministry, mission and purpose," says Root, "when it forgets itself. Its mission and purpose is to concern itself with the ministry of God who is acting in and for the world."¹ We forget about *ourselves*. We point the way to *Jesus*.



Reading the history of our church, I see that it began in a time of great upheaval. Newly arrived people fleeing war and famine came from half a world away. They settled on farms. They had much to learn and bills to pay. Young woman moved into the city to work. The language was new, the culture was foreign, and many of them must have felt very much alone.

So some churches got together to establish a mission outpost, a place, a home away from home, where they could gather. J.J. Thiessen and his family reached out to them. They had Bible studies and worship services. And as more Mennonites came their numbers grew.



¹ Andrew Root, "Churches and the Crisis of Decline (Ministry in a Secular Age Book #4), Chapter 6: The Church Is Not the Star of Its Own Story, Copyright 2022 by Andrew Root, Published by Baker Academic, Grand Rapids.

In that fledgling community of girls (and others) that was to become our church, they discovered they were not alone. They had each other. And more importantly (for this was *more* than just a social club) they had the presence of Christ!



When the church is at its best, we show the world who Jesus is. We don't always get it right. Sometimes, disciples can get in the *way* of Jesus.

I think of Zacchaeus, who wants to catch a glimpse of Christ. But he cannot, because the crowd around him is so thick, and large, and enthusiastic even, that there's no room for a guy like him.



In fact, the crowd is hostile towards him. They elbow him aside and push him away. They don't like him. They think Zacchaeus is not worthy of the Saviour they have found.

Can the church be that way too? So wrapped up in our own little world, so self-righteous and fearful and insular that we push people away? Can our actions betray Christ? Our agendas undermine his message?

The church, through the ages, and in our time too, has much to repent of. And much still to learn about God's kingdom way. If we could just keep our eyes on Jesus, maybe we'd get it right! After all, we're not that different from Zacchaeus. It's only by the grace of God that any of us are here: called, forgiven, restored, made new.



In a few moments we'll gather at the communion table. We'll remember Jesus' sacrificial love for us and all creation. And we'll renew our commitment to be his disciples, following his kingdom way. Here, at the table of his grace, may we see him as he truly *is*. And follow him where he leads.



90 years on, you may wonder why we are still doing this. I believe it's because the world still needs a Saviour. There is still a desire among many in our world to catch a glimpse of something holy and transcendent, a loneliness to be met, an emptiness to be filled. There is a yearning, even in people who think they have it all, for something more.

That need for something more may not be well-articulated. Ask your neighbour what it is they need, and they may hard-pressed to say. But love is never out of vogue. And accepting others into a caring community will never take us far astray. And discovering a spiritual home, a place where God is present and living and active, *that* is the greatest gift of all!

These things Christ gives us to share with all the Zacchaeus's of our world. We are his witnesses. In word and deed, we are called to point the way to Jesus. May God bless all the ways we've done that here, in this community of faith over the past 90 years. And may God bless us as we continue to do it today.