

The Rev. Curtis Metzger
All Saints' Episcopal Church
Pentecost 21: Proper 26
October 30, 2022

Habakkuk 1: 1-4; 2: 1-4
Psalm 119: 137-144
II Thessalonians 1: 1-4, 11-12
Luke 19: 1-10

This morning's gospel story of Zacchaeus is a favorite and well known and loved. In these short 10 verses we are able to clearly picture this encounter with Jesus and also clearly see some spiritual lessons. So, what do we make of this fellow up a tree?

Do you remember when you were young the fun of climbing trees with friends, or even by yourself. I remember often thinking it didn't look hard from the ground, but it seemed very different when you got in the tree. And though the perspective and distance you could see got more interesting the higher you went, the more dangerous it began to feel. And then I also remember that often climbing down seemed trickier than going up! But, oh!, for the view and the feeling of being 'above it all'. I still like the feeling of being up and seeing a view --I suppose that for those of us who live in mountains, this might be a common appreciation. Although, at this age, I must admit, that the idea of climbing a tree just makes my knees feel weak!

I think there is a spiritual corollary to tree climbing, or perhaps diving under water into the liquid quiet. There is something about stepping above or swimming below our work-a-day world that does help us gain perspective. I think Jesus is always inviting us into that space, what we call prayer, because in fact it does help us gain perspective and live a truer life when our feet are back on the ground. Let's turn to the story as our example for today.....

At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus is headed to Jerusalem and he arrives in Jericho, maybe 15-20 miles from Jerusalem. Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector for the Romans in this town, and though a Jew, he is *persona non grata* among his people because of his role as a tax collector. He has enriched himself in his work. A little

irony is that his name is derived from a word in Hebrew meaning ‘pure’ or ‘righteous’.

He hears of this Jesus coming to town, and the whole countryside is full of gossip and wonder about this man. Zacchaeus decides he wants to see this man for himself, but because he is short in stature, he is not able to get a glimpse of him, so he climbs a tree so he can see him. I find it interesting that the Bible begins in the Garden of Eden with a tree, the Tree with the fruit able to impart the knowledge of good and evil—in other words truthful and spiritual seeing; and the Bible ends with the Tree of Life in the book of Revelation, the tree that provides healing or wholeness to the nations. And here we have Zacchaeus climbing his tree so he can see and be made whole.

And this is where the controversy and miracle begin to happen. Jesus sees him, and clearly understands this man really wants to know him, and Jesus invites himself to his house. This is scandalous to everyone around because they all know who Zacchaeus is and how shameful it would be for Jesus to be welcomed by such a man as this. Zacchaeus is thrilled, and immediately pledges to give half of his wealth away and promises restitution to anyone he has defrauded. Interestingly, he uses the amounts that are proscribed by scripture for those caught defrauding others—4 times the amount you defrauded someone. If you caught yourself in a mistake, the law allowed for a penalty of only 20% above what you took from the other person. Zacchaeus knew he was defrauding people.

What was it about Jesus that inspired this sudden conversion and desire to do good? Over and over again Jesus seemed to have this effect on people. Note also, that Jesus was coming to his town and inviting himself into his house—he wasn’t waiting for Zacchaeus to come to him or to be invited by him. Remember this: God is always leaning in to us, God is always knocking at our door. What we need to do is spiritually climb a tree, that is, open ourselves in prayer, so we can see and then say ‘Yes!’, be made whole, and then bring reconciliation and restitution to the world around us!

You know, after nearly 40 years of pastoral care and counseling, the thing I have experienced over and over again with people of all kinds, is the desire to be known and loved when they think they are unlovable. We create all kinds of defense mechanisms to deny this, and we busy our lives to help us ignore this, but yet, when

we stop and learn to climb our tree (pray) in order to see God and be open to God's desire to come home with us, then we begin to let go of all that fear of being unlovable. What's interesting about this is that for those who awake to this, it has huge impact not only on them, but on the people in their lives. What is revelation to them becomes reconciliation and generosity to the people around them. Zacchaeus' spiritual encounter brought real earthly blessings!

So, I invite you to spiritually 'climb your tree' (pray), or spiritually dive under water if you're afraid of heights! When we practice this way of prayer and communion with God—what Jesus was inviting us into throughout his whole ministry—we awake to the glory of God all around us, and we live a life full of the freedom and generosity of the Spirit!

P.S. A little tree humor.....

Sidney was almost ninety years old. He was quite short and weighed less than 100 pounds soaking wet. He walks up behind the head lumberjack, taps him on the shoulder, and says, "Excuse me, I'd like a job chopping down trees."

The lumberjack, 6 foot four inches tall and 275 pounds of muscle, turns around and looks at little Sidney. He says, "You've got to be kidding. This is a tough job. Not for little old men like you. Besides, where did you ever work chopping down trees?"

"Well, I'll have you know," says Sidney, "I used to work at the Sahara Forest."

The lumberjack looks at him and says, "You mean the Sahara Desert."

"Well, yes..... now!" says Sidney.