

**“Downward Mobility”**  
**Fairmount Presbyterian Church**  
**Luke 19:1-10**  
**October 31, 2004**  
***The Rev. Carol S. Wedell***

I'm guessing that more than a few of you here this morning could join me in song right about now. You know how it goes --- “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he....” What an engaging story for children – and so easy to remember! A short man climbs a tree and Jesus takes notice of him. Every child who has ever felt left out because of their small size knows that Jesus cares about them too. And what a fun image! Here is this little guy, pushing through the crowds, trying to get a view, who finally gives up and climbs the nearest tree. Can you imagine the delight our children might have if their church school class, which is, after all, based on appealing to a variety of learning styles, included tree climbing?

Yes, it's a great story for children. But it is so much more than that. We have done ourselves a great disservice by relegating one of the most potent and provocative stories in Luke's gospel to those under the age of 12.

This is Reformation Sunday – a day to look back *and* a day to look forward. What a good time to take a look at biblical story that pulls it all together and shows us the heart of the gospel. Let's return to the text, found only in the gospel of Luke.

Zacchaeus lived in Jericho. Jericho was a land rich in produce. It was on the great caravan routes. On his way to Jerusalem, Jesus passes through this central hub of commercial and human activity.

Luke tells us that “A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.” In one simple sentence we are given an abundance of information. We learn his name – which ironically comes from another Hebrew word which means, “the righteous.” What follows is anything *but* righteous. For Zacchaeus was not only a tax collector – one who worked for the Romans at the expense of his own people, and almost always extorted additional money. Zacchaeus was the *chief* tax collector. This meant that he managed the system – and it was a system more corrupt than we can ever imagine. Zacchaeus was at the top of the heap – the guy who skimmed off of those who skimmed off the top. So the last piece of information Luke gives us

about Zacchaeus is almost redundant, and unquestionably an understatement. "He was rich."

And that is where the emphasis falls -- for Zacchaeus was indeed rich -- very rich. (what some might call "filthy" rich.) In Luke's gospel, it is quite clear that this label is not a compliment. The rich have not fared well in Luke. From the rich young ruler, who walks away sad, to the foolish rich farmer, Luke makes it clear that wealth forms a significant impediment to following Jesus.

With amazing brevity, Luke explains why Zacchaeus would have been totally despised by the community. More than a leper, or beggar, or even the Romans, he would have been hated and avoided by his own people. Zacchaeus was a complete outsider. He may have been wealthy, but it is clear that he would have had very few folks with whom to enjoy that wealth. What a lonely existence. By some standards, he had it all. Yet Zacchaeus was a truly sad character. Who would want to live that way?

The word is out that Jesus is coming through town. Stories, perhaps rumors, have been spreading. The townsfolk want to see for themselves. And you know how crowds at parades can be. The people line the streets, jostling for the best position, hoping to catch a glimpse of this religious superhero.

Zacchaeus decides to check things out. But the crowds are thick. And truthfully, they aren't inclined to let this despicable man through. Elbows are thrown, the way is blocked. He'll never see. He's just too short. (Ok, so some of us can relate to that more than others....) But up ahead he sees a sycamore tree. So the wealthiest guy in town, does what no self-respecting adult in his day would *ever* do -- he *runs* past the crowd. Then he risks total humiliation and climbs up the tree.

From a few feet up, Zacchaeus has a pretty good view. He is temporarily safe from the jeers of the townspeople. He can look around, and for once, not be noticed -- at least, not too much. Zacchaeus sits where its possible to look down upon the procession and stay uninvolved. He can just barely see through the leaves and watches as Jesus draws closer. Then the totally unexpected occurs -- the shock value of which, I'm not sure we appreciate.

On his way through town, Jesus stops, and instead of speaking to the eager, common folks who line the street on both sides, the people right in front of him, he peers up into a tree. Jesus had eyes that saw what others missed. He didn't miss Zacchaeus. Calling him by name -

- *by name!*-- Jesus says, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."

Up in that tree, can you imagine what Zacchaeus must have been thinking – if he could think at all? It is certainly much easier to go on with life as we know it, with our preoccupations and concerns, than to invite Jesus to take a look at how we live and who we are. I would imagine that Zacchaeus had considered the emptiness of his life before—the day to day reality of having betrayed his own people. Having it all, and yet having so little. Something happened this day that was different. Something in Zacchaeus opened up when Jesus approached. Something finally broke free that allowed him to be receptive to the gift of transformation which came through the loving voice of Jesus.

I agree with Barry Robinson who wrote, "Luke doesn't say whether Zacchaeus climbed down out of the tree or fell out of it. My guess is that it was the latter, that he was so astonished by what Jesus had to say that he literally lost his grip." So this distinctly "upwardly mobile" man comes flying down from the tree and greets Jesus with joy.

When we share this story with children, we often stop right there. Jesus notices this small man who has climbed a tree to see him, and goes to his house for dinner. A nice, fun story, with a happy ending.

But it doesn't end there. Almost from the minute that Zacchaeus' feet hit the ground, the murmurs begin. It doesn't take much to imagine the scene. All the people who may have waited hours to see Jesus, all of the people from whom Zacchaeus has taken what little money they had, do not see the justice in this situation. Its just not fair! We work hard, play by the rules, follow the Torah, and what do we get? Nothing! Yet this wretched man, who should be run out of town, is honored with the presence of Jesus – at his home, no less! "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

From the murmuring of the crowd we hear a central theme of the gospel, a theme the reformers sought to reclaim: God seeks us out, not because we deserve it, but out of God's great love for us. There is a simple word for that: grace. What Jesus showed to a chief tax collector in Jericho is that God accepts and transforms the unacceptable, loves the un-loveable, forgives the unforgivable. And all this happens before Zacchaeus has responded in any way. Grace and forgiveness came first.

Luke does not record that Jesus said anything at this point. But Zacchaeus doesn't hesitate. Something in that encounter with Jesus changed the way Zacchaeus saw the world. He could now see people in need where before he only saw people he needed to fleece.

Zacchaeus jumps in and offers to make restitution. Not only restitution as required by Hebrew law, but unbelievably extravagant restitution – up to 400% more than he took from them in the first place! The fiscally prudent among us might wonder if Zacchaeus has lost his mind. Not only has he come down from the tree, he has voluntarily become “downwardly mobile,” giving up a lifestyle he thought he wanted, but which left him empty and lonely. (As a side note: yes, it is stewardship season; and no, I'm not requesting that you follow the model of Zacchaeus and give half of what you have. However, it would have an interesting effect on things around here!)

No less a miracle than the raising of Lazarus or the feeding of the 5000, Zacchaeus is transformed by the love of God, as Jesus calls him by name. Zacchaeus rips off the façade of tax collector, gives away the mask of “rich man” and reclaims his identity as a child of God. Jesus pronounces, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” Zacchaeus, who was lost, stuck up a tree, is sought out – called by name, and welcomed home.

There is something that no commentary addresses, no sermon preparation material even talks about. What happens to Zacchaeus after Jesus leaves? Does he lose his job – or quit? Can the community actually accept him – even after his remarkably generous restitution? Will they really trust him? Or will he have to start over somewhere else?

Coming down from that tree gives Zacchaeus the opportunity to reclaim his identity as beloved child of God, and to live a life in response to God's grace. But it doesn't guarantee that he will be liked or accepted, or that his life will be easy. Yet the amazing thing is that Zacchaeus still comes down from that tree, and chooses to move forward toward a future which is anything but secure. Somehow, I can see the quiet smile moving across his face, as he begins to imagine a life rich in ways he has never known.

And that, my friends, is where you and I come in. For like Zacchaeus, we are invited to a life that is rich beyond imagining, a life filled with God's grace. Like Zacchaeus, the gift of God's loving acceptance

awaits us if we are open to it. Like Zacchaeus, if we are hiding behind masks which cover up who we truly are, we are being sought out, called by name. "Today salvation has come to this house."

Where are you this morning? Up a tree, safely watching from afar, wondering if anyone will notice you? Upwardly mobile, but empty inside? Perhaps you are among the crowd, grumbling when things don't seem to be fair?

Where are we as a congregation? Are we still stuck in a tree, unwilling to take the risk of a future which isn't fully defined? Zacchaeus found his entire life transformed by the power of God's love – but he had to come down from that tree. Transformation is about being open to the new life that God intends for us.

I've seen signs that of the transformation which God is bringing. I've heard more and more of you talk seriously about your faith, and what it means in your life. I've seen an increasing number of you engaged in small groups, or other contexts where you can risk being known for who you are. I've seen excitement and commitment from a vast array of folks about the Boys and Girls Club. Last year, more people than ever made a financial pledge to Fairmount – and in so doing, said, "yes, I want to see where God is leading us."

If you listen carefully you just might hear a familiar voice: "Hey Jean, Bob, Hey Dick, Hey Fairmount -- Hurry up and come down – for I'm coming to *your* house today!"

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