

“Lessons from a Short Man”
A Sermon by Martha M. Shiverick
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
November 4, 2007
Text: Luke 19:1-10

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He entered Jericho and was passing through it.

A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much. Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is the son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

What a great little story. It is the last of Jesus’ encounters with outcasts before his entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday. In this short story, Jesus is walking down the road with his entourage and crowds have lined the street to welcome and greet this new leader and to see this man about whom everyone was talking. Zacchaeus wants desperately to see Jesus but because of the crowds and really because he was very short, he could not get a glimpse of him. My visual picture is of him trying to look over the shoulders of the crowds or to push his way to the front, but because of his petite size, he could not. Short and petite are things I have never experienced, but in the little town of Gates Mills where I live, there is a parade on my street every Independence day. People actually come from all over to see this little parade that oozes Americana and if you are feeling nostalgic for a simpler way of life, this is your Mecca. It gets crowded. BUT, the little children have all sorts of methods to ensure that they can see the parade and get the candy that is thrown out to them by the people on the

floats and cars that go by. Well, Zacchaeus is as resourceful as the Gates Mills children are. He sees the direction Jesus is traveling, and runs ahead to climb a tree so he can get a good view of this Son of God about which he has heard. Commentaries point out that this in itself must have caused the locals to ridicule him and laugh as it was considered undignified for a grown man to run and a man of his position in the city should certainly not climb trees. It must have caused some really gleeful snickering to see this man who was not liked by the community running further down the road and climbing up a tree. How humorous to catch someone you don't like doing something utterly foolish. You can almost picture the elbow poking and pointing at this funny sight.

But to these smug locals who were having a laugh at Zacchaeus' expense, the next thing that happened must have been shocking. This man Jesus did not stop and bless them as he walked by but stopped and asked for Zacchaeus to come down from the tree so Jesus might speak to him. And then, most shocking, Jesus said that he would be dining at Zacchaeus' home that evening. The reality is that Jesus would bring honor and blessing to which ever house he dined and to the crowd's surprise, he chose the person they considered the most unlikely. When Jesus said he was dining with Zacchaeus, he was crossing yet another barrier of ritual purity. Jesus was recognizing a tax collector as having dignity and standing within a community that did not view him that way. Everyone there would have given their eye teeth to have Jesus at their home, but he chose the one they despised.

And the reactions to this were instantaneous! The crowd grumbled of course. They had judged him as a sinner and Jesus did not. And Zacchaeus, well, his response was to vow in front of Jesus and the crowd that he would restore to anyone he had defrauded four times what he owed him and he would give away half of what he owned. He had become a new person! He freely declared his resolve to make amends for past wrongs as a result of this honor Jesus has bestowed upon him.

And then Jesus responds by affirming that Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham. Jesus has stated that this man who everyone else had written off as a lost sinner was a part of God's chosen. This rich man, this tax collector, this short man they had ridiculed earlier, was equal in Jesus' eyes to the righteous town folk. We learn that Jesus' ministry to the outcasts and despised reached the rich as well as the poor, tax collectors as well all

others. Then the last line of the story tells the whole message. The hero in the story is not Zacchaeus but is Jesus. Jesus, Son of Man, came to seek out and to save the lost.

There are a couple important messages for us in this wonderful little story. The first is in how the people had stereotyped and labeled Zacchaeus. He had been judged as being not as worthy as everyone else. He was labeled a sinner. And the surprise in this story is throughout the rest of Jesus' teachings in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus was not kind to the rich. It said that it was as hard for a rich man to get to heaven as it is a camel to get through the eye of a needle. The rich have already achieved their reward and people like Zacchaeus are seen as being greedy, of having too much. But here, Jesus blesses him and saves him. Jesus makes the crowd look at Zacchaeus with new eyes. Jesus chose to go to HIS house for dinner. Everyone there wanted Jesus to bless their household by having dinner at their home, but Jesus chose the one person everyone else had written off. This is a good lesson for us.

I doubt that I am the only one here this morning who suffers from a case of "prejudgment" and self importance every once in a while. Just as the people in the crowd wrote off Zacchaeus because he was a rich tax collector, I have written people off because of my stereo typing of individuals. One of my good friends Ogie White, who is now the pastor emeritus of Bethany Presbyterian Church, taught me this lesson well. We were at a church conference in another city in a huge hotel in New Orleans. This was before the hurricane. I know you are thinking church conference and New Orleans should be mutually exclusive phrases, but it really was there. At any rate, before one of the big dinners, a few homeless men had entered the ball room where the banquet was going to be served and ate dinner before others came in. As you can imagine when they were discovered, they were asked to leave by the hotel management, and security escorted them out, and the table was reset before the dinner began. Everything was sanitized and back to normal. However, during the dinner, a woman attending the conference noticed her purse was not with her. She panicked and an announcement was made to everyone there. Rev. Ogie White turned to me and said, "You know what's sad? Everyone here is thinking it is the homeless men who took the purse." I winced as I too was one of those hundreds having that thought. I winced again, when her purse was found back in her hotel room; it had never been brought to the dinner. Whenever I find myself falling back into prejudgments I think of that story and thank God for giving me Ogie as a

friend to teach such important truths. And Ogie's ministry at Bethany reflected the same non-judgmental nature he modeled to me. The church serves a community meal on Friday nights which the Fairmount confirmation class helps serve on the second Friday of each month. Because of Ogie's ministry, the meal is served with dignity and feels loving and non-judgmental to a community of people who others might look down upon or to which they might feel superior. Ogie's ministry was to teach that in God's eyes all are loved and equal in grace.

It kind of scares me to think what reversals Jesus might make if he walked our streets today. What societal norms and prejudgments would he challenge us to struggle with as he blessed people we have judged as not worthy of God's love? Most here at Fairmount would say that salvation is offered to all who turn to God, but do we really mean everyone? We might be a progressive church but have we truly wrestled with what we believe about salvation for the people whose religious beliefs are really different than our own. What about the Jews, the Muslims, the Buddhists and faithful followers of all the world's religions? I have just begun reading a book by Dr. Cynthia Campbell, the President of McCormick Theological Seminary, titled "A Multitude of Blessings: A Christian Approach to Religious Diversity" in which Dr Campbell addresses the issue of whether non-Christians can be saved. She addresses the tension of believing in Jesus as Savior and Lord while living in a pluralistic society with religious diversity. Frankly I was surprised that this is so controversial, but this is one of those issues from which one of our Presbyterian churches might leave our denomination. (You will be reading a lot more about this in the weeks ahead.) Clearly whether non-Christians are worthy of God's grace and love is an issue for some. AND, it is also something we followers of Christ need to wrestle with as we live in this increasingly global village called earth.

The other lesson I glean from this passage is the good news of salvation. While Jesus walked down that road, he stopped for a single person. Zacchaeus climbed that tree thinking it was he who was seeking Jesus, but it was Jesus who was seeking him. I doubt Zacchaeus climbed that tree thinking if he did so, he would be seen and then saved by Jesus. In fact Jesus announced he was coming to dinner at Zacchaeus' home before he told of his new found generosity and commitment to the poor. No, Zacchaeus hadn't prepared for this. If he had, he would have made things look better for Jesus. He probably would have wanted to look and act just like all the people in the grumbling crowd. After all they were the righteous! But the

message about salvation is that it is not about fitting into the world's stereotypes. It is not about the good or bad labels by which we are known to ourselves and to others. Jesus has another criteria. Jesus comes to seek out and save the lost. Jesus wasn't there to reward the righteous. Jesus wasn't there to tell the faithful followers that theirs is the kingdom. No, Jesus came for people like you and me who struggle with what is good and right and sometimes make the goal of doing what is right in the eyes of God, and more often falling short of the mark. The outrageous Good News in this story is that through Jesus Christ a camel can pass through the eye of a needle, and a man such as Zacchaeus, and people, imperfect like ourselves, through grace are forgiven and loved by God. Amen.

The Rev. Martha (Missy) Shiverick, M.D.V., M.S.