
“Seeing and Being Seen”

A SERMON on Luke 19:1-10 for the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
(being it also Reformation Sunday)

Preached 30 October 2022 by the Rev. Matthew Emery, Lead Minister¹
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For those of us whose journeys intersected with Christianity and church as children, one of things we undoubtedly remember are the catchy little songs that churches inevitably seem to foist on young people. Sunday School, church camp, Vacation Bible School—in all of these places, you’ll find any number of jingles and choruses that tell some Bible story or some aspect of our faith in a way that hopefully even kids can remember. From “Jesus Loves Me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so” and “Praise Him, Praise Him, all ye little children” to “Pharaoh, Pharaoh, O baby, let my people go” and “Draw the Circle Wide, draw it wider still”, many generations have made their contributions to this body of song that hasn’t always been objectively “good” or “high quality” but has always been memorable.

One such song that I remember learning back when I was a kid—I think it was in my years of going to Vacation Bible School at the old-order Mennonite church² nearby—was “Zacchaeus was a Wee Little Man.” <singing> “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.” I know that a good number of you are familiar with it, too, as it was one of those ditties known on both sides of the border and across the pond over in the UK, too.

It’s a fun song, admittedly, with a bright tune. It is a happy song with lyrics that paint a picture of Jesus encountering a short, little man: Zacchaeus, who was so small that he could not see Jesus over the shoulders of those who stood in front of him; Zacchaeus, who was so excited to see Jesus that he would not let his short stature stand in the way, and so climbed a nearby tree to get a better view. Then, a turn of events that the song admittedly conveys in a somewhat patronizing way, Jesus sees him, calls him down, and then goes with Zacchaeus to dinner. It’s a happy little ending to a happy little song about a feel-good story in scripture.

The problem with the song is that it wears a rut in our imagination. I don’t know about you, but I have a hard time reading this story any other way than it is presented in the song. Even as we listened to Laurel read it this morning, I was hearing the song play in my head. Perhaps you did too. But there are other ways to read it. This tale is much more than a feel-good story, and it is much, *much* more than what the song conveys.

For one, Zacchaeus may or may not have been short. This is because the word that most commonly gets translated as “diminutive” in the translation of the Bible, actually means “diminished.” Was Zacchaeus a wee little man? Maybe, but not necessarily, because being diminished refers to a lot more than one’s height.

Zacchaeus was a man diminished. He was the Chief Tax Collector, a position that you might think should have come with some level of prestige, some level of standing in the community. But for Zacchaeus it did not. We know this much from the text; the community despised him. Maybe they shoved him to the back of the crowd. Perhaps they wouldn’t look at him or acknowledge him. Wouldn’t be hard to imagine that they openly grumbled about him as if

¹ This sermon incorporates material originally authored by the Rev. Adam Yates for preaching on 30 October 2016 at St. Stephen’s Episcopal Church, East Haddam, Connecticut, United States; used by permission.

² Technically not “old order”, but rather a community of the *Church of God in Christ (Mennonite)*, also known as the *Holdeman Mennonites*. I’m simply using “old order” as a short-hand way of describing them, since they are a branch of the Mennonite tradition that has remained very conservative and traditionalist in their belief and practice in comparison to more mainstream Mennonite branches like the Mennonite Church Canada / Mennonite Church USA or Mennonite Brethren denominations.

he weren't there, as if he couldn't hear their words.

When we really look at what's going on in this story, we get the impression that Zacchaeus had very few friends. He was forced to climb a tree, a humiliating act, because it was his only escape from the shoves, and the jabs, and the dirty looks of the people below. He was forced to climb a tree because it was the only way he would be afforded a view of the scene unfolding in front of him. Zacchaeus was a man diminished in status. He was a man diminished in the eyes of his own community.

When we allow ourselves to read the text like this, unencumbered by children's songs and freed from the ruts in our imaginations, then we see that this is not a happy story about a comical short person. It is a story about broken relationships. It is a story about alienation. It is a story about shame and humiliation.

All of that changed the day that Jesus came to town.

A crowd had gathered around to hear Jesus teach, for word had spread ahead of his arrival. Amidst this crowd that had gathered, Zacchaeus had been pushed to the very back: to the back, where nobody would notice him; to the back, where nobody would see him.

But the Lord saw him.

The Lord saw him straining his neck as high as it would go at the back of the crowd. The Lord saw Zacchaeus there, at the edge of his own community, an outcast among his neighbors. The Lord saw him filled with shame and despair. The Lord saw all that Zacchaeus had done, the good and the bad—after all, who among us is without fault? The Lord saw him, a child of Abraham, perched high up in the tree overhead.

Yes, the Lord saw him, and called out, "Zacchaeus, come down from that tree." And he did. Zacchaeus, the man diminished in the eyes of all who saw him, stood before Jesus and was diminished no more. Zacchaeus stood before Jesus in the full stature of a child of God.

This is the Good News of the Gospel this morning, my friends. Jesus sees us. Jesus sees us when we feel that nobody else sees us. Jesus sees us when we are too ashamed to be seen. Jesus sees us when we feel overlooked, invisible to the rest of the world. Jesus even sees us when our own efforts and strainings somehow just can't quite get us into a position to see him.

But it is more than Jesus seeing us. Jesus seeks us out too, just as he sought Zacchaeus amidst the crowd. Jesus seeks us out, starting from before we can even respond, as was signed and sealed in the waters of our baptism. He seeks us when we are lost. He seeks us when we are alone. He seeks us when we are most broken and unsure of ourselves. Jesus seeks us out, and we are never lost to God. Jesus finds each of us, and in him we are never apart from God. Jesus seeks us out, and offers us the healing and wholeness that each of us so deeply longs for.

Stand in your full stature as children of God, Jesus says to us. Enter into the Kingdom of God, he says—the salvation being built in your midst, now, today. I will come into your house... and *you* will join with me at the banquet feast.