

Seeing Yourself with New Eyes

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Sermon by Pastor Cindy Bullock

The Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke. (Luke 19: 1-10)

[Jesus] 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 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 a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

The Gospel of our Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

As I said earlier, this week we continue the series on seeing. Last week I mentioned that we all have a lens through which we see the world with – a lens created by our experiences, our family, our knowledge, our faith. And through this lens we see the world. Jesus invites us to add love to the lens. To see through the lens of love. To quote Bishop Michael Curry, "If it doesn't look like love, it doesn't look like Jesus of Nazareth, and it doesn't look like Christian." The lens is love.

This week we will consider how Jesus looks at us, and we'll do that through the story of Zacchaeus. Ah, Zacchaeus. We know this story. We like this story because it is simple, and it's straightforward. And it's not one of those stories in scriptures where you kind of scratch your head and you go, "What are they talking about?" "What is Jesus up to here?" It's clear; it's easy.

I have to admit, though, it's not one of my favorite Bible stories. It's too one-dimensional. It's sweet; it's comical. Short guy climbs a tree, and it makes us laugh. But it's kind of about somebody else. I have trouble finding myself in this story. This story doesn't change me.

In case you don't know the story, here is how it traditionally goes. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, which means he collected taxes for the Roman occupiers. That was somewhere around thirty percent of your income that had to go to Rome.

The thing was, there was no regulation. There was no oversight of tax collectors. So they could collect whatever they wanted, pay what they owed to Rome, and pocket the rest. It was, "name your own salary" and you could go collect it from people. People had no recourse, because tax collectors could have them arrested and killed for not paying the tax.

Needless to say, tax collectors were generally disliked and universally distrusted. Think used car salesmen or members of Congress, which were two of the least trusted professions in the U.S. in 2017, according to Gallup.¹

Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and Zacchaeus was short. He was a wee little man; a wee little man was he. And in a world where the average male was only five foot six inches, he was really short.² Short and a tax collector.

He was also curious about Jesus. But being vertically challenged, he couldn't see over the crowd, so he hiked up his robes, finds himself a nice sturdy sycamore tree with good sturdy branches, and climbs up in it.

Jesus is walking by. And there is this carnival atmosphere, with crowds all around, calling to him, waiting to hear what he will have to say, trying to touch him. And Jesus stops, and he says, "*Zacchaeus, you come down, because I'm going to your house today.*"

By the end of the visit with Jesus, Zacchaeus is so transformed that he promises to give away half of what he has and make amends for everything he's done wrong. And Jesus says, "*You are saved. Salvation has come to your house.*"

It's a lovely story about a bad guy seeing the light and becoming a good guy. It is clear, and simple, and clean; and the inspiration for a great camp song.

But do you see yourself in this story? Can you see yourself as Zacchaeus, the short, evil, self-centered guy who sees the light? Or do you see yourself in the crowd who was surprised that Jesus could love this guy? Or do you find yourself on the outside looking in, thinking it's a nice story, but I'm not really affected by it? Where are you in the story?

That's what I was feeling, on the outside looking in, until I started to do a little research and discovered that this story really does have some interesting twists. Now, I will start by saying, it's perfectly legitimate to stick with the traditional reading of this. It's fine to say, "I like this. I'm sticking with it." I'm not going to argue with you.

¹ <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1654/honesty-ethics-professions.aspx>

² <https://ourworldindata.org/human-height>

But given that, let me propose a different reading of the story of Zacchaeus, to see if it can bring us some new insights.

First of all, Zacchaeus was a tax collector. That remains the same. He is still collecting taxes for the occupying empire. Second, Zacchaeus is short – maybe. The word in Greek means, “diminished.” So you can read “short”, or you could read, “isolated,” “unnoticed,” “dishonored.”

If that’s the case, Zacchaeus becomes the guy in the office that no one will speak to, or they avoid, or they make fun of. “Did you see what he did this time?” She becomes the teen in the black clothes with the hoodie up over her head, looking down, hoping no one notices her because she can’t stand one more person thinking that she’s worthless. He becomes the person no one notices, the one they walk right by, the one who can’t get a salesman to notice them. The one who wonders, “What’s the point?”

Zacchaeus becomes a real person in pain, whose life is so diminished that he is invisible. We may not be that person, but we’ve felt that way at times. Humiliated, fearful, shamed. Zacchaeus was diminished.

I wonder why he wanted to see Jesus. I wonder if he was aching for someone to see him for who he really was, and not just a cartoon character – a stereotype. I wonder if he was just curious, like everybody else, to see what Jesus would say. Regardless of the reason, Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, and the crowd kept pushing him back. “Get out of my face!” “What do you think you are doing here?” He tries to get in, and no one will let him.

In determination and frustration, and “who cares anyway?” Zacchaeus climbs a tree. Awkward, painful, he gets himself up there and he hangs on. Jesus comes by. And it says, “*Jesus looked up.*” Jesus saw him. Jesus did the thing that nobody else could do. Jesus saw him. And remember the lens is love. So Jesus says, “You. I will stay with you.” Zacchaeus is chosen. He is honored. He is seen.

The crowds don’t like that. They grumble. They are indignant. “Why did he get picked? He’s a sinner. He’s a nobody. I’m worth more than him. Jesus should be staying with me.” And admit it – we all say that sometimes. The comparisons, the ranking, the competition for honor and love and being seen. “Well, I may not be perfect, but I’m certainly better than he is!”

But what the crowd didn’t know, what they didn’t know is what Zacchaeus tells them next. We read, “*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.’*”

But here’s the twist. What it actually says in the Greek is, “*Look, half of my possessions I give to the poor*” - not I will give, but I do give. “*And if I have defrauded anyone, I pay them back four times.*” Not, “I will pay them,” but, “I do pay them.”

The verbs are in the present tense. He's already doing this stuff, and nobody knows it. You can check out the King James version or the old RSV. They have it translated in the present. "*Half my goods I give to the poor.*"

Now, there are a lot of ways to read present-tense verbs. And believe me, scholars have spilled a lot of ink on this. Maybe he's deciding at that moment, "I give things away." But what if Zacchaeus is already doing his best to live honestly in a corrupt system? What if Zacchaeus is trying to be a good man right now, and nobody, can see it? He is diminished because nobody can see him for who he really is. They believe what they want to. It's easier to keep score. To put people in boxes – "good," "bad." And that's all they are — diminished.

But Jesus sees Zacchaeus and knows him. And Jesus says, "*Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.*" Jesus doesn't say, "Today salvation has come to this house because he is a really good guy." He doesn't say, "Salvation has come to his house because his life is turned around." Jesus says, "*Salvation has come to this house because he is a child of Abraham.*" Beautiful, gifted, chosen, no matter what. He is God's child only because God sees him that way.

Now, that is something I need to hear. I need to hear that I am seen through the eyes of love. That Jesus is not keeping score. That my life is saved. My life is given meaning not because I am good enough or not because I turned things around – but because I am seen and known, and will always be a Child of God.

Now this story can speak to me. I – we all – know what it is like to be diminished, by the crowd, by the voice in our own head, saying, "You're not good enough." "You don't belong here." "You have nothing to give." But even when we feel diminished, Jesus sees us. Jesus knows us. Jesus loves us.

We, like Zacchaeus, are children of God, loved, gifted, called and sent out. We, like Zacchaeus, are seen with the lens of love and can look out through the lens of love.

Amen.