

Luke 19: 1-10 “Found Up a Tree” Rev. Janet Chapman 10/19/25

Two brothers who were known for always making trouble in the neighborhood, at school, in the mall and arcades, and even at church, were causing their parents to have multiple meltdowns. Whenever anything outrageous and out of line happened, the boys got blamed and more times than not, they were responsible. The parents read books, took the boys to counseling, prayed for them, and placed them in multiple programs, trying to discipline and train them differently, but to no avail. Finally, out of sheer desperation, they decided to consult their pastor. They started with the oldest son, who was 10, and told him he had to go meet with the minister. This scared the boy as the minister, in his early 70's, always looked so stern in the black robe he wore every Sunday. What would he be like one-on-one? In the office, the minister looked at the young boy somberly then asked him, “Young man, where is God?” The boy had no idea how to answer, and for once in his life, remained quiet. The minister repeated the question, “Young man, where is God?” Again the boy said nothing. Finally, the pastor thundered one last time, “Young man, can’t you hear me, I asked you, ‘Where is God?’” At this, the boy bolted out of the office, raced home, ran upstairs and began to pack. Noticing his younger brother watching him, he declared, “You’d better pack too, brother. They’ve lost God and I know they’re gonna blame us!”

In the little town of Jericho, another young man, young enough to still climb trees, was also blamed for outrageous things. Some townspeople probably accused him of causing them to lose track of God as well. His name was Zacchaeus and he was the chief tax collector and a very rich man. Our story is found in the section of Luke which has been nick-named the “Gospel of the Outcast,” because here Luke emphasizes God’s concern for those people whom others tend to despise or condemn. Included in this section are stories of the Lost Coin, Sheep, and Prodigal Son, the dishonest manager, the dishonest judge, the Rich Man and Lazarus, the 10 Lepers, and the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Interestingly, Luke ends this section of the “Gospel of the Outcast” at the point Jesus enters Jerusalem where he too will be despised and rejected. But back to Zacchaeus, that despised and rejected, wealthy

man. Part of his wealth was a bit of an accident because he lived in Jericho, where two main roads came together. This meant more traffic. Roman tax collectors took as much as they needed to pay the government. Anything they got beyond that, Rome didn't ask questions about. This was the origin of the phrase, "What the traffic will bear." And Zaccheaus got lots from the traffic at that particular intersection. In addition to having the least favored job in town, he was also short and insecure about his height. Now I try not to make too many references to that because I'm also height-challenged. The fact was if Zacchaeus wasn't right up front, there was no way he would be able to see at parades and such. To him, this was a distinct disadvantage. He would not fare well with our church kitchen microwave, to say the least. So when Zacchaeus heard about Jesus coming to town, he found the most hospitable tree in town to climb, to see over the crowds. The tree also provided some privacy because there would be less need to interact with others. It still would have drawn some raised eyebrows as a very undignified act for a member of the Jericho Rotary Club and government official. But something about what he heard about this Jesus made him take the risk. The whispers about being a miraculous healer and wise teacher, eating with sinners and touching the unclean, couldn't be ignored. He had to see for himself. He heard the people murmuring and nudging each other, "He's coming this way," as they drew more tightly together on the edge of the road. If it hadn't been for Zacchaeus' perch, he wouldn't have seen anything. If Zacchaeus hadn't been in the right space, not just up in a tree, but in a space of openness and awareness that there is more to life than money, popularity, and status, the two probably would have never met. There was no reason for Jesus to look up when all those eager faces were at eye level, waiting to welcome him. Just as Jesus passes underneath this short, insecure man, something makes Jesus look up and their eyes lock. Jesus recognizes someone longing to grow, not as much physically, but spiritually in stature and wisdom. For you see, spiritual size has to do with the stature of a person's soul, the range and depth of their love, and their capacity for relationships. Process theologian Benard Loomer explains that people of significant stature have large spirits and visions. Those with

great stature can entertain contrasting viewpoints without losing their spiritual center. They recognize diversity as a call to creative transformation and not fearful retreat. Their stature is contagious as they maintain their integrity, while various outlooks enhance their being, rather than becoming defensive and insecure. It seems to me we need a lot more people with such stature in prominent roles of leadership these days. The minor prophet Habakkuk writes about a watchman who seeks a wider perspective on the current national situation. He goes to the watchtower to gain insight and wisdom in a time of national crisis. God appears absent, the nation is in chaos, and injustice abounds. In such times, one can easily give up hope, succumb to focusing on survival alone, or yearning for yesterday's world. As the watchman looks at the horizon, he hears God's voice, "Write the vision, make it plain on tablets, so that a runner may read it. For there is still a vision for the appointed time." What the prophet is saying is that the present moment is not the sum of reality and injustice is not the aim of history, nor is it the will of God. So pause, take a breath, open up your senses, and awaken to a larger vision of history, a wider awareness of your life and the world. The future is beckoning us forward to new horizons which are embedded in today's challenges. Zacchaeus took a risk and climbed a tree to get a glimpse at a new horizon, just like the watchman in the watchtower. From his perch in a sycamore tree, Zacchaeus comes face to face with a larger vision and his calling within it.

We are too easily tempted to stay complacent in the crowd, to fall into traps of visions that are too small. Indeed, many folks ask us to think small, fear the future, and long for the days when might was right and money determined worth. We hear that nothing is more important than keeping the outcast just that, cast out; that continued consumption of fossil fuels is all we can ever aspire to; and that if we make sure the rich get richer, then eventually we will get a piece of the pie as well. But our Savior approaches, the one who refuses to neglect the millions stuck in poverty; the one who seeks out the outcast and teaches care of the earth; the one who blesses the vulnerable and saves the lost. With our Savior in the wings, we must decide whether to stay short in stature, to remain cramped in spirit, focusing primarily on prosperity

and property to the exclusion of healthy relationships. Or do we climb a tree to get a larger vision, to expand our worldview and empathy to neighbors, both near and far?

In our story, Jesus looks up and sees one who is ready to admit where they have gone wrong and come clean. There is a reason that AA groups are among the fastest growing groups in our community. It is because they start with an affirmation of faith; “We admit we were powerless, our lives had become unmanageable. We came to believe in a greater power. We decided to turn our lives and will over to God, as we understand God. We made a searching moral inventory...” and so on. The 12-step program is effective because folks start not with denying what’s wrong but by confessing what’s wrong. By doing so, we recognize Christ coming to us with that beauty, power, forgiveness, and love that we need, and not with judgmental condemnation so typical of some Christians. So Christ stops the whole parade, looks up, and says to Zacchaeus, “Come down. I’m having dinner and staying with you tonight.” He joyfully shimmies down the tree and receives the master with outrageous enthusiasm. The crowd wants to blame him like they blame him for everything else, but it is the master who called out first. They haven’t seen enough transformation to know what it looks like and they complain, “Things aren’t done this way!” But Zacchaeus isn’t dissuaded as he announces, “Half my goods, I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone, I give them 4 times what I have taken from them.” It isn’t enough to grovel in confession and never go on from there. That is the first step but when faith finds you, be ready for changes, which are as great as any really new love can produce. Just like falling in love, when it is genuine, people notice because it changes the way you talk, meet others, respond to need, how you spend your time and money – it changes everything! Likewise, people can tell when it is fake, when one stays lost to God and to themselves. Once Zacchaeus found Christ, or more accurately, Zacchaeus was found in a tree, the larger vision of salvation took hold and his stature grew tremendously. God calls us to overcome the limitations that constrict our vision and seek larger perspectives and spirits to match the challenges of our time. Will you come climbing with me?