

“Zacchaeus’ Sycamore Tree”

By Scott Runyon

First Baptist Church Birmingham

April 14, 2019

Luke 19:1-10

Our story today comes from Luke’s writing that we call the Gospel of Luke, which is about the life of Jesus. At this point in the bigger story, Jesus had been traveling around and was on his way back to Jerusalem. On the way, he shared with his close friends, called disciples, that he needed to go to Jerusalem so that what the ancient prophets had said would be accomplished.

He told them that the Jews were going to hand him over to the government officials who would torture him and kill him. He even told them that after he was killed, he would rise from the dead.

But his close-knit group of friends, couldn’t grasp it — they couldn’t understand what he was talking about.

Jesus and his company of friends were heading west from Jericho toward Jerusalem. Now Jericho was right next to the Jordan River. It is not a coincidence that Jesus was traveling this particular road.

It was generations before when the ancestors of the Jewish people had traveled that same route. They came out of slavery in Egypt and were led by God through the Red Sea on dry ground. They were heading to their salvation in a land called the Promised Land, where all their needs would be met, where they would be safe, where they might once again, as a people, dig roots and live freely for God with one another.

To get to the Promised Land, the people needed to cross over another body of water, this time it was the Jordan River.

In our story, Jesus was traveling that same road from the Jordan River toward Jerusalem, the Promised Land. Along that road was Jericho, where Joshua led the people in a great battle opening the way to the Promised Land.

The prophets had said that God would once again bring peace from Jerusalem for all of the Jewish people and for the whole world.

The word on the street and the buzz in the air was that Jesus was going to accomplish this. He was heading toward Jerusalem and excitement was building.

Hope was placed on Jesus to re-establish peace, re-establish order,

re-establish a new kingdom for the people like the glory days of King David providing peace, freedom, justice, righteousness, and compassion.

Such hope! Such promise!

The story I am about to read happened along this road to Jerusalem as Jesus was walking through Jericho. Jericho was known as the city of palms, and it was time to break out the palm branches to herald Jesus, the new King.

READ LUKE 19:1-10

I have to go back for just a moment. This story links to another story from the prior chapter. Luke told of a rich young man who came to talk with Jesus. This man told Jesus that he had kept all of the appropriate Jewish laws since he was young and wondered what else he might do to have this new life that Jesus had been talking about.

Jesus told him that he only lacked one thing — sell his possessions, give his wealth to the poor and follow him. The man just couldn't do it and walked away sad.

Jesus acknowledged afterward that it is hard for those who are wealthy to become a part of what

God was doing because their wealth is an obstacle.

Then, we have this story of another wealthy person — a tax collector named Zacchaeus.

When you think of a tax collector, think of a corrupt lawyer who selfishly bleeds people's pockets dry with unabashed greed. They were very wealthy off the backs of the poor and were detested and considered corrupt by the general population. Needless to say, they didn't exactly have many friends.

But Zacchaeus desired to see Jesus, and after an encounter with him, he committed to do what the rich man in the prior story could not. He committed to make restitution for his past actions and set right what had been wrong.

This was exactly akin to Jesus' heart and the message he had been preaching. Jesus embraced what Zacchaeus was doing and called it salvation, despite the grumbling of the crowd.

Zacchaeus, by his heart and his actions, was himself an example of Jesus' to declare a new world, a new way to be human.

When any of us have an intention to do something important, there are always obstacles.

Let's take the example of starting a new non-profit. Have any of you ever done that? If you have, then you know about the many obstacles in that process. Right from the beginning, one of the first obstacles is being able to communicate in a compelling way about your vision.

You need to be able to talk about that vision over and over again to all kinds of people. It's helpful to condense this into your "elevator speech" — a 30 second compelling summary of your vision that addresses what amazing thing you are going to accomplish and how you will do it.

There are also many other obstacles along the way, like the 70-some-odd pages of paperwork to file with the state of Michigan to be recognized as an official non-profit organization.

You also have the business plan that includes financial projections. This alone can get some people stuck and prevent the non-profit from getting off the ground.

Then there is pulling together a great Board of Directors who understand and are committed to the vision of the organization.

In addition to all of this is creating processes and procedures for the

non-profit, managing a staff, applying for grants, marketing, creation of and delivering services or products, and so much more.

Each of these can present significant obstacles to growing your non-profit.

Whether or not you are starting a non-profit, we all encounter obstacles in life and often they have us stopped and discouraged. We allow the obstacles to prevent us from living the dreams or visions that God has planted inside us.

At the beginning of our story from Luke today, Zacchaeus had significant obstacles to his vision and desire to connect with Jesus.

1. First, there was a massive group of people crowding around and following Jesus, so it was very difficult to get to him. **"I just can't battle the crowd,"** Zacchaeus probably thought.

2. To make matters worse, he was short and couldn't see Jesus over or around the crowd of people. This could have stopped him. I can imagine he may have said to himself, **"I'm just not tall enough to see Jesus or get his attention."**

3. Third, as a tax collector, he was hated by most people in the crowd,

so nobody was inclined to help him. He was very much on his own. This was perhaps his biggest obstacle and maybe had his vision for meeting Jesus weaken. **“This whole crowd is against me. It will be impossible to get to Jesus!”**

You probably have your own version of these obstacles in your own life. Maybe one of these is the obstacle in your life:

1. I don't know enough about the Bible to be used by God.
2. I don't have the time to devote to serving God because my schedule is full with taking care of the kids, working full time, and working on all of the projects around the house.
3. I don't know how to pray and I'm not sure it really works anyway.
4. I've been divorced and feel ashamed. God can't possibly use me?
5. What other obstacles to connect with or serve God do you see in your life?

Zacchaeus had obstacles too. What did he do? He looked around for a resource, a tool, a vehicle that might overcome the obstacles he faced.

He found a big old sycamore tree right there along the road. He

could get up high to see over the massive crowd and wouldn't have to deal with the people who held aggression toward him.

From the sycamore tree Zacchaeus was able to fulfill his vision, his dream, his passion to encounter Jesus and allow the presence of Jesus to transform his life.

There is always a way. There is no obstacle too big or powerful that will keep you from God or God from you. As the Apostle Paul wrote to Christians in Rome,

“For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”

No matter what the obstacle you face, there always will be a tool, a resource, a vehicle, a person, or an open door somewhere that will connect you to Jesus.

Like Zacchaeus, it is a matter of opening not only your eyes, but your heart to see what is available right in front of you.

What is your “sycamore tree” that can help overcome the obstacles in front of you?