

SERMON

Pastor Cris Frigm

What did you see as you listened to this story? I suppose I'm making an assumption that you were visualizing these events as you heard a somewhat familiar tale. Maybe you were just singing a song instead.

If you tried to visualize the action in this story, I suspect that you saw a rather short, well-dressed man climbing up a tree...in robes...so he could see over the crowd. Maybe this tax collector is a comically stereotypical villain – whatever that might look like for you...the story sets us up to picture an undesirable character. He's short – always a questionable characteristic. He works for the Romans. In fact he's the chief of the undesirable tax collectors. Into the story walks, the decidedly **not** short, hero of the story – the Messiah who calls the evil rich tax collector down from the tree so they can eat a meal together.

If that's your mental picture, you might be right. But if you read verse 3 again and try to track the pronouns, you might discover that your picture might not be as accurate as you believed. In a verse that is all pronouns, maybe it was Jesus that was too short for Zacchaeus couldn't see him over the crowd.

Maybe our characterization of Zacchaeus needs to be a bit more faithful to the nature of translated texts. You may have heard this story before. You may have sung a song about it when you were a kid in Sunday School – or a teacher. And it has been fairly solidly embedded in our faith story to see what we expect to see: the conversion of wee little Zacchaeus from an evil Roman-puppet of a tax collector to a generous, honest son of Abraham and follower of Jesus.

As I said earlier, you wouldn't be wrong. But you might be missing a little bit of the nuance in this story. All because we've traditionally translated verse 8 as the future tense.

"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.'"

Just by encountering Jesus, Zacchaeus promises to change his ways – giving away half of what he has and generously making up for his dishonesty. That's the picture created in this story. Except...there is no "will" in the Greek text. The verbs translated as "give" and "pay back" were not written as future tense possibilities, but *present tense realities*. How might we imagine this scene if we would have grown up hearing that Zacchaeus said, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I **give** to the poor. If I have been dishonest in any way, I already **pay back** four times as much."

What if it isn't about trying to convert Zacchaeus from unrepentant evil tax collector to disciple, but about how people are seen?

That's where the story began. Jesus was passing through and Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was. Maybe he had heard about this unusual Rabbi. Maybe he had heard

the rumors of healings and accounts of unusual arguments with the religious and secular authorities. Whatever prompted his curiosity, he wanted to **see** Jesus.

And in seeing Jesus, he was also seen for who he really was. He wasn't the pawn of the Roman empire. He wasn't an unrepentant scoundrel; he was a son of Abraham. He was the (present-tense) receiver of salvation.

The crowd grumbled when they heard Jesus was going to eat with him, because all they saw was the tax collector. All they saw was his perceived "sin." Jesus saw who he really was. Jesus saw in Zacchaeus the story of God at work in the world.

On this festival of All Saints, we remember and honor those in whom we have seen God at work in the world. We will later name those who have been part of our faith journey and shown us something of God's love – something of what it means to follow in the path of Jesus.

There's a connection to what Zacchaeus does. No matter which principal actor in this story was the wee little man, Zacchaeus has to work to see Jesus. It's a somewhat straightforward task of climbing a tree. It's not exactly dignified for a man of his station. It's not exactly dignified for anyone wearing a robe. But it gets the job done. He climbs the tree and sees Jesus. Jesus sees him.

We're not looking for Jesus to be physically walking down the street where we just have to climb a tree to see him. We have to look harder. We have to read the stories that help us see and try to interpret events from millennia in the past. We look for Jesus in those who are pushed to the margins by the people in power – just like Jesus was. We look at the examples of faithful living in those we encounter. We might not have Jesus walking among us but we have these living examples of faith – not perfect – but people who show us love and teach us about God.

We will say 4 names that are directly connected to my wife and me. As I reflect on what I have seen in these four gentlemen, I recognize that they lived drastically different lives. I certainly didn't learn the same things from my Uncle as I did from Pastor Connie Youse. Nor did I have similar experiences with my friend's father as I did with my wife's father.

But in each of them, in their own way, I saw God at work in the world. Sometimes I'd have to climb a tree to see it. And sometimes it was like Jesus was standing right there in front of me, inviting me to dinner in my own house.

The Son of Man, the Messiah came to Jericho on his way to the cross. We don't know that he went there specifically so he could see Zacchaeus, but we know that Zacchaeus was seen. We know that Zacchaeus saw Jesus. We know that salvation walked through Jericho that day and that we see that salvation in the journey to come – the cross, the tomb, and the Easter dawn. We read the stories and sing the songs. In the lives of the saints who have filled our lives, we see Jesus and we are seen. Thanks be to God. Amen.