

“A Bird’s Eye View”

Luke 19:1-10

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Politicians are known for working the rope line after speaking at a rally. This rope marks the place where the candidate will walk as he or she leaves the event.

People gather along the rope line hoping to shake hands with the candidate, take a selfie with them or have a brief conversation. Of course, everyone along the rope line hopes he or she will be one of the lucky ones the candidate will notice.

I don’t believe Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree hoping Jesus would notice him but merely as a way of getting a glimpse of Jesus. Little did he know his bird’s eye view of Jesus made it easier for Jesus to see him.

Zacchaeus was not a popular man in the lovely town of Jericho. As a matter of fact, he was probably the most despised.

He was the chief tax collector, which meant he was a part of the burdensome and corrupt Roman tax system. For sure, Zacchaeus did not live up to his name, which meant pure and righteous one. He appeared to be everything but a model of integrity and compassion.

When Zacchaeus heard Jesus was passing through Jericho, he knew the crowd surrounding Jesus would make it difficult for him to catch a glimpse of this highly popular teacher. Zacchaeus was a short man, making it unlikely he would be able to see over those in front of him.

As a result, Zacchaeus devised a plan and worked it to perfection. He ran ahead of the crowd and climbed onto one of the low hanging branches of a sycamore tree.

There is a bit of irony and humor in the way Luke tells the story. In all likelihood, Zacchaeus was surrounded by poor people in that tree because they commonly ate the figs which grew on Sycamore trees. It was not a high quality fig, so rich people avoided it. You can

imagine many people looked twice when they saw one of the wealthiest men in town sitting at a poor man's lunch counter.

When Jesus approached the tree where Zacchaeus sat, he paused and looked up. "Zacchaeus, come down immediately," Jesus said. "I must stay at your house today." (Luke 19:5b)

Surprisingly, Zacchaeus offered no resistance. He promptly and gladly descended that tree and escorted Jesus to his home.

I can only imagine the reaction of the people as they watched Zacchaeus and Jesus walking shoulder to shoulder to Zacchaeus' home. They had to be shocked, dismayed and irritated. Instead of publically rebuking Zacchaeus, Jesus bestowed a degree of honor upon Zacchaeus that none felt he deserved.

Luke does not tell us about their dinner conversation, but he does share the results of it. As their time together ended, Zacchaeus stood up and said, "Look, Lord, here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. If I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." (Luke 19:8)

To Zacchaeus' delight, Jesus responded by saying, "Today, salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost." (Luke 19:9-10)

Why do you think Jesus singled out Zacchaeus the day he passed through Jericho?

There were plenty of people he could have visited who would have been more religiously and socially acceptable. Surely, Jesus knew he would be criticized for going to Zacchaeus' home.

Yes, he did, but Jesus was more concerned about transforming lives than shoring up his reputation. He was always looking for ways to bring outcasts back into community, as opposed to some of the religious authorities who valued ritual purity over redeeming people.

Jesus was never content with ignoring the disenfranchised or pushing them away as many people did. No one was worthless or hopeless to him.

I also think Jesus wanted to offer Zacchaeus a different vision and purpose for his life. Up to this point, Zacchaeus' life seemed to be all about him.

Jesus wanted to broaden his vision to include others. The potential for doing good deeds that Jesus saw in Zacchaeus was probably unmatched by anyone in Jericho, and Jesus felt compelled to help Zacchaeus see the difference he could make in so many of his neighbors' lives and embrace it.

Jesus was aware of something else that day. This would be the last time he would pass through Jericho. If he was going to talk to Zacchaeus, it was now or never. There would not be another opportunity to have this conversation and offer this alternative way of thinking and living.

This was why Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today, I **must** stay at your house." You can hear that sense of urgency in Jesus' voice, I'm sure.

Why do you think Luke included this story in his gospel? It is clear he wanted his readers to understand the importance of loving the unlovely by treating them with dignity, respect and compassion.

Hearing pleas for help that others discount or ignore was the essence of Luke's faith. No one was irredeemable to Jesus or him. This was a lesson Luke reinforced throughout his gospel.

I see a stewardship lesson in this story, too, and it doesn't surprise me. Jesus talked about money more than any other topic, and Luke wrote about money more often than the other gospel writers

Specifically, what did Luke want his readers to take away from this encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus? I pondered this question last week and want to share some ideas for you to consider.

I believe Luke wanted his readers to know how they earned their money was important to God. I am intrigued by what Zacchaeus said to Jesus at the end of their time together. "If I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

What does that statement tell you? It tells me he had been dishonest and wanted to make amends. I sense sincere confession and genuine repentance.

Perhaps some of Luke's readers were struggling with the temptation to be dishonest in their business dealings. Like Zacchaeus, they saw ways they could exploit others for personal gain.

According to Luke, this was completely unacceptable for someone who claimed to follow Jesus. Under no circumstances was the first generation of believers to lie, cheat or steal to fatten their pocketbooks. They were called to live by a higher standard, the ethic of love, and they were to let the Golden Rule guide their decisions, especially in the marketplace.

So are we. This is why we must never forget the way we earn our money is important to God.

If we own our own business, we need to be honest, just and fair in our dealings with others, including our customers and employees. On the other hand, if we work for someone, we must be dependable, loyal and trustworthy. The health and stability of every community, as well as the validity of our Christian witness, are dependent upon this level of integrity.

With this in mind, if Jesus sat down at your kitchen table with you this afternoon, would the subject of integrity come up? Would he confront you over your financial dealings with others?

Have you been fair and just, or have you deceived and exploited others? Has your obsession with money led you to abandon your principles, misplace your priorities and disregard the welfare of others?

We were not created by God to live this way, and when we do we pay a high price. We alienate many, if not all of the people around us, and we end up living miserably in a prison of our own making.

I believe this is probably where Zacchaeus was the day Jesus met him. I also believe it is where some of us may be today, and if so, I pray this story will speak to us about the changes we need to make.

In the coming weeks, you will hear more from Keith about a moral issue that needs our attention. It revolves around Payday Loans.

Payday loans are high cost, small dollar loans offered to individuals. They require no credit check.

The annual percentage rate and fees for these loans are often 300% to 700% and can climb even higher.

The name “payday loan” comes from the term for repayment, typically two weeks or until the individual’s next payday. At the end of the loan term, the borrower is forced to either pay the entire sum or have the total amount deducted from his or her bank account.

As an alternative, the borrower can pay only the fee and interest and “rollover” the loan for another two week term. At this point, despite having paid the fee, the borrower will still owe the entire principle plus another installment of fees and interest.

You can see how borrowers can get trapped in a cycle of perpetual indebtedness. Training manuals obtained during investigations have revealed that industry members explicitly instruct staff on how to create this ‘cycle of debt’. Such a practice is clearly predatory and needs to be challenged.

Keith has already begun a conversation with some of our members whose careers are in finance. They are looking for ways to help people who have fallen prey to predatory lenders.

Pray for them as they map out a strategy and pray God will show us what we can do as a church to remove predatory lenders from our state. Based upon today’s text, we cannot ignore what is happening to ‘the least of these’ among us.

My friend, Dr. Colin Harris, believes we must ask if there is a connection between the comfort I seek for myself and my family and the discomfort and insecurity many are experiencing nearby and far away. Does our faith provide us a platform to see better or a sanctuary that prevents and protects me from seeing?

I believe you know how Luke would answer this. How will we?

What other stewardship lessons did Luke have in mind when he shared this story? **I believe he wanted his readers to know how they spent their money was important to God.**

Certainly, God wanted them to be responsible and disciplined so they could take care of themselves and their families. They needed to be good managers of their money, which would enable them to pay their bills and honor their financial commitments. At the same time, they needed to be unselfish and help those who were struggling to make ends meet.

I get the feeling Zacchaeus was not doing this. “Here and now, I give half of my possessions to the poor,” Zacchaeus said to Jesus. I believe Zacchaeus had a little catching up to

do. For too long, life had been all about him and his desires, with no thought of what others needed.

I wonder what Jesus said to Zacchaeus that melted his heart. I've never been quite this persuasive.

Maybe he helped Zacchaeus to understand the deepest longings of his heart would never be fulfilled by amassing a great fortune or surrounding himself with all the things money can buy. Instead, his need for meaning, purpose, guidance, direction, peace, security, confidence, courage, self-esteem, joy, forgiveness and the assurance of eternal life could only be found through a close relationship with God and loving relationships with those around him.

Perhaps he opened Zacchaeus' eyes and helped him to see what he gave to help others would bring him more happiness, peace and pleasure than what he would keep for himself. Nothing he could buy to add to his possessions would compare to the joy he would feel knowing he made a difference in someone's life because he shared with them what he already had.

Whatever Jesus said, he convinced Zacchaeus it was more blessed to give than to receive. Immediately, Zacchaeus shared one-half of everything he had with the poor.

If Jesus came to your house this afternoon, would he look around at all you have and ask how you are using it to alleviate poverty and make your community a better place for all people to live? How would you respond if he asked how you are using your money, possessions and influence to feed the poor, clothe those who are cold, house the homeless, heal the sick, educate children and care for the elderly?

If he asked to see how much you give to the church to support its many ministries, would you be eager to show him? Perhaps this is something you should ponder this week. There is still time to make changes.

Actually, I think this is another reason Luke included this story in his gospel. **He wanted his readers to know it was not too late for them to change their values, priorities and lifestyle.** If Zacchaeus could do it, so could they.

Is this the good news you need to hear today because you have not been honest in your dealings with others and need to make amends for this? With God's help you can.

Have you have not been as good a manager as you should have been and need to be more disciplined and responsible? With God's help you can.

Have you have not been as concerned about your neighbors as you should be, and you need to be more generous and benevolent? With God's help you can.

With God's help you can make all these changes, as difficult as they may be. I hope you will because I am confident others will follow your lead, just as Zacchaeus' family followed in his footsteps.

Do you know what comes to mind each time I read this story? It is Charles Dickens' novel, *A Christmas Carol*.

You recall Ebenezer Scrooge was the main character in this story. He was the richest man in town, but also the most despised because he was so selfish and rude. After three ghostly visits on Christmas Eve, he changed his attitude and lifestyle, and he became one of the town's most generous benefactors and respected citizens.

Both Zacchaeus and Scrooge show me there is hope for us.

Why not add your name to theirs.