

Date: October 31, 2004

**SUNDAY:** Ordinary 31

**SERMON: Treed by Salvation**

Text(s): Luke 19:1-10; Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4

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Every time I read the story of Zacchaeus in Luke's gospel, my mind immediately goes back about 28 years to a Tuesday evening Bible study in our parsonage in Malaysia. We were a group of about a dozen. Now to understand this, you have to understand that most of the Chinese people of our congregation, even though they lived and worked in the city, had grown up in smaller towns or villages, many of them on family farms, and though you can take the farmer off the farm, you can't take the farm out of the farmer. They are always interested in anything that grows, and particularly if what grows is edible.

At any rate, we read this passage together and then began to discuss it. At some point, one of the women who was a high-ranking police officer in Special Branch—the Malaysian equivalent of the FBI—and who really was a city person, said, "Wait a minute. What is this 'sycamore tree' that Zacchaeus climbed? I don't think I know that tree. Immediately someone else, who had a Chinese version of the Bible along with her English version said, "Well, in Mandarin, the name is \_\_\_\_" Another man chimed in, "Ah, I think in Foochow, that's the tree we call \_\_\_\_." Someone else said, "No, that's not the one. It's the one we call \_\_\_\_" Another responded, "Oh, I know that one. In Hokkien, we call it \_\_\_\_." The original questioner said, "I still don't know this tree. What's it look like. Is it a fruit tree?" Well, about 15 minutes later, after we had thoroughly satisfied ourselves that we knew what sort of tree it was, and that it did not produce any edible fruit, we finally were able to get back into the story of Zacchaeus.

So this morning, we're not going to worry about what kind of tree Zacchaeus climbed. It's only important to know that whatever kind of tree it was, Zacchaeus was really "out on a limb," so

to speak, or if you prefer a hunting metaphor (for those of you who are old coon hunters), he found himself "treed," with nowhere to go but down and face the Hound of Heaven who awaited him at the bottom.

Whoever the author we call Luke was, he was a literary artist. He's very skillful at linking themes and stories together, and he has set us up for this story up by the stories he has told us previously. The themes of wealth and justice are very prominent in Luke's mind and in his gospel, and already we have read this fall, the story of the rich manager and his dishonest steward, the story of the rich man and poor Lazarus who sat on his doorstep, and last week, the story of the rich tax collector who discovered justification. And we skipped over the story just before this one of the rich young man who comes to Jesus and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life, and when Jesus suggests that his possessions are possessing him, goes away sorrowfully because he can't free himself. And this prompts Jesus to say that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

Yet nothing in Luke is ever simple or predictable. For just as we saw that it was the rich, but corrupt tax collector who went down to his house justified, so in this story of Zacchaeus we find another example of a rich man who manages to squeeze through the needle's eye into the kingdom contrary to everyone else's expectations, and to their great annoyance and chagrin.

Not only does Luke tell us that Zacchaeus is a tax collector, but he's the chief tax collector. He's the head crook, the corrupt head of a corrupt and rapacious system. And this makes him also a very powerful man. His fellow townspeople not only despise him for his collaboration with Rome, but they fear him for his power to dispossess them of their property if it should suit him to do so. Tax collectors had a political balancing act to walk. On the one hand, as long as they collected as much tax revenue as Rome demanded, they could collect as much more as

they could gouge to support themselves. On the other hand, if they got too greedy and their collections too onerous, it would drive people to revolt, and then Rome would hold them accountable. So they had to balance their greed with prudence.

And apparently Zacchaeus was good at this necessary balancing act, because Luke adds, “and he was rich.” He might not have done good, but he did well.

But it’s a tough life for everyone, even for rich chief tax collectors. And Zacchaeus had a distinguishing characteristic. He was short. If Luke were writing in our climate of political correctness, he’d probably have said that Zacchaeus was “vertically challenged.” Probably what drove him into a life of legally-sanctioned crime and treasonous collaboration was that all of his life people had called him “Shorty,” or “Peewee,” and made jokes about him. But he got his own back. He’s the one living in the big house with hot and cold running servants, so he’s done well enough for himself.

Luke doesn’t tell us why he was so interested in seeing Jesus that day. He simply says that Zacchaeus wanted to see who Jesus was. Maybe he was just curious about this itinerant teacher/prophet/healer he’d heard people talking about. Maybe he’d heard that Jesus told stories about rich people and tax collectors and didn’t always make them out to be the bad guys. Perhaps he and Jesus had met before, for when Jesus stops under the tree and calls him by name, he doesn’t appear to be terribly surprised. Or maybe there was something way down deep inside Zacchaeus that really wanted and longed to be good and was disgusted with always settling for doing well instead of being and doing good. We don’t know. But whatever it is was, it drove Zacchaeus to put aside his concern for his own dignity and the gravity of his office long enough to climb that tree— whatever kind of tree it was.

And then Jesus comes along and looks up

in the tree, and says, “*Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, because I must stay at your house today.*” Isn’t that a rather strange greeting? Not, “Gee, Zacchaeus, why don’t you climb down and invite me to your house for a cup of coffee.” Now this sentence is pure Luke, I think, because one of the themes Luke has going in this whole section of his gospel is that notion of necessity, of Jesus having to do something, of it being high time for something to happen. It’s the way he talks about Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem where crucifixion awaits him. There’s an intensity, an urgency here. Hurry down, Zacchaeus. I must, I have to stay at your house today.” For Luke, God’s saving work always has an urgency about it, probably because human need is so urgent. When you’re in a real mess, you need help urgently to get out of it. This salvation business, this kingdom of God business is not a leisure-time activity. It’s not something you work out on the golf course. It’s a crisis. Decisions have to be made. Wrongs have to be righted. Radical shifts of direction have to be taken. Now! Now!

That urgent demand, “Hurry Zacchaeus, I must. . .” evidently strikes a resounding chord in Zacchaeus, because Luke says, “*So he hurried down, and was happy to welcome him.*”

Now, if we were cynics, like the ones Luke mentions in the story, we might say that Zacchaeus only hurries down because Jesus is giving him the chance to polish his image and strut his position. The little man is still trying to be big. The critics in the story don’t focus their gripes on Zacchaeus so much— after all, they know him all too well. Instead, they focus their cynical comments on Jesus. “*He’s going to be the guest of one who is a sinner.*” In their eyes, that’s what’s wrong with this picture. Jesus is passing them up to go have dinner with the biggest SOB in town. He’s giving short shrift to the good people and great face to a short crook.

But it’s Zacchaeus who puts paid to their cynical gripes. He does something that I’d be willing to bet no person in that crowd ever

expected him to do. He publicly, right out there in the street, right in front of God and the whole world, commits himself, not only to becoming an honest man, but to becoming a generous man as well. He first of all promises to divest himself of half of his wealth and give it to the poor—wealth that he has accumulated to a large extent by exploiting the poor. But then, even after giving away half of what he has, he also promises four-fold restitution to anyone he's defrauded, and there's probably not a family in town that he hasn't defrauded. Now here's a man who understands what repentance really is. Repentance isn't about saying we're sorry; repentance is about setting things right. It's about doing justice. It's about restoring what has been stolen or broken. It's about building community and promoting *shalom*. That's what Zacchaeus is really doing. This isn't a hollow promise; there's no going back on his word. In a small town like this, he wouldn't last five minutes if he tried to go back to his old ways. No, his repentance is about as concrete as it could be. There's going to be a lot less in his bank account, and a lot of other people are going to see justice done.

And that's exactly why Jesus says, "*Today, salvation has come to this house, because he too is a Son of Abraham.*" Salvation isn't merely some pietistic, inner, spiritual experience. Salvation has a concrete shape; justice is restored. And part of that restoration is not only the restoration that Zacchaeus makes by giving back his ill-gotten gains; he himself is restored to a community from which he had been excluded as an outcast. His profession had caused him to be ostracized from the community of people bound together by their covenant with God. He was no longer even considered by them as "*a son of Abraham.*" But now that community has to open up and receive him back as one of them. And that's also part of what salvation entails— not only Zacchaeus's restitution to the community, but the

community's willingness to restore Zacchaeus and embrace him as a brother.

There's a wonderful story told about Samuel Colgate, the founder of the Colgate empire. Colgate was not only a good businessman; he was also a devout Christian, and contributed heavily to charitable causes, including among other things, to the theological school that now bears his name, Colgate-Rochester.

He lived during the time of the Second Great Awakening, that late 19<sup>th</sup>-century period of religious fervor and revivalism that swept the country. During an evangelistic service at his church one day, the visiting evangelist invited anyone who wished to have their sins forgiven and begin following Christ to come forward and kneel in front of the altar. The first person down the aisle was a woman who had a very bad reputation in the community for being, well, generous with her favors. The congregation looked on approvingly as this woman wept and confessed her sins. Then she stood and testified that she believed God had forgiven her for her past life. And again there were beaming smiles on the faces of the congregation. Then she said she wanted to become a member of that church. The smiles disappeared. In that congregation, anyone who wanted to become a member had to be recommended by another member and voted on by the whole congregation. For several moments there was an awkward and embarrassing silence. Then Samuel Colgate got up and said, "I guess we blundered when we prayed that the Lord would save sinners during our revival services. We forgot to specify which particular sinners we wanted him to save. The Holy Spirit has touched this woman, but the Lord apparently doesn't understand that she's not exactly the type we wanted him to rescue and bring into our church. Maybe we'd better pray again and spell it out more clearly for God, so that he'll only save the sinners we approve of." Immediately, someone made a motion that the

woman be accepted as a member, and it was unanimously approved.

Salvation isn't for the faint-hearted or self-satisfied. Like Zacchaeus, we're often grasped by it when we're up a tree and out on a limb of our own making. God's saving mission is an urgent one. God doesn't wait until we're good and ready; sometimes, when we're least expecting it, we hear that summons to conversion like Zacchaeus did: "Hurry up and come down out of your tree; I have to come stay at your house." And when that Word comes to us, it compels a response from us. We hear it as a word addressed to us personally. And the result of responding to that Word is always as concrete and as practical and as rooted in the real world as it was for Zacchaeus. Salvation is not a private spiritual experience that we can take off into a corner and enjoy by ourselves. It grasps us individually, but immediately commits us to a life of just social relationships in community. It will commit us to a public stand and a public accountability. Salvation is about making things right, about wholeness both for ourselves and for those around us, including those from whom we are estranged by personal history or economic and social barriers. Salvation is simply another word for becoming all that we were created to be and have never fully realized— truly human beings. Or as St. Athanasius put it some 1600 years ago: *The glory of God is a human being fully alive.*