

Everyone loves the story of Zacchaeus.  
That song will stay in your heads for days by the way –  
I have been singing it all week.  
When I was in Israel,  
there were street vendors in Jericho  
selling pictures of a sycamore tree  
that said Zacchaeus' Tree across the bottom.  
While sycamore trees have been on the earth  
much longer than humans,  
the longest a sycamore tree can live is 500-600 years.  
But, I happily handed over some shekels  
to get my picture of Zacchaeus' Tree,  
because everyone loves the story of Zacchaeus.

Do we love the story because Zacchaeus was short?  
Do we love it because he decided a look at Jesus  
was more important than his dignity  
and shimmied up the tree?  
Do we love it because a known sinner  
repented of his evil ways  
and repaid all that he had stolen?  
Or do we love the story  
because Zacchaeus was brave enough  
to change his way of life,  
his social standing,  
his wealth,

everything to embrace the love of God.

The gospel of Luke uses several themes to tell the story of Jesus' life and most of them can be found in this one story.

The first one of these themes is that Jesus always welcomes those who society shuns.

He embraces the outsiders.

In fact, if we could superimpose ourselves into the gospel, we would most likely not be recorded in any of the stories of Jesus.

We fit in well with our society, we have houses to live in, jobs to do, food to eat, but we don't often talk about how pious we are like the Pharisees, and we are not obnoxiously rich like Zacchaeus.

Yes, we have our faults, but nothing extreme.

Jesus probably would not eat at our houses.

Jesus walked this earth and he met with people whom we would classify as drug addicts, prostitutes, criminals, the homeless, as well as the greedy, the CEO's of fortune 500 companies, the shady mortgage companies, and maybe some professional athletes.

But, this is who Jesus chose to eat with and to speak to.  
Jesus loved those who whom no one else would love.  
Zacchaeus represents all of these people.  
We may love Zacchaeus,  
but most people did not,  
most people would go out of their way  
to make sure Zacchaeus knew they didn't like him.  
One commentator speculated  
that the only reason Zacchaeus climbed a tree in the first place,  
is that others were intentionally blocking his view  
and not allowing him to move to the front of the crowd.

Yet, stereotypes, labels  
and mean spirited people do not stop Jesus.  
He simply walks up to that tree and says,  
"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down,  
I must stay at your house today."  
Jesus welcomes and embraces those  
who we consider to be outsiders.

Another theme that Luke uses throughout his gospel  
is that of the character of faith and repentance.  
It is not enough to understand  
that Jesus is God's Messiah and believe in him.  
A person's life must reflect to confession that Jesus Christ is Lord.  
A person, like Zacchaeus,  
must change his behavior, lifestyle, and practices.  
Prison ministry is a place that the gospel is thriving.

Yes, this change of lifestyle  
is forced upon people,  
but ideally the goal of prison is rehabilitation.  
You can find story after story of how  
a prisoner's life has been changed by the gospel,  
by something or someone they encountered in prison,  
an encounter with the divine  
that touched them in such a way  
their outlook of life is changed,  
just like Zacchaeus.

People who have been introduced to the gospel  
when they have nothing left to lose  
are often the people who take it the most seriously.  
The prisoners then take others under their wings  
to share the gospel message,  
some, when they get out of prison  
go start programs in their neighborhoods.  
Of course, there are some who once released  
go back to the same old ways,  
but many church going people  
attend to worship on Sunday mornings  
and then return to their normal lives  
as well during the week.

No one is perfect in their commitment to the gospel,  
yet Luke finds this idea crucial to the message of Jesus,  
faith and repentance.

Something that Luke often shows  
as an example of character of faith  
is the right use of money and possessions.  
Zacchaeus was a tax collector  
and furthermore he was the chief tax collector of the region.  
Tax collectors are, by definition, wealthy.  
They purchase the rights to collect taxes  
and profit from what they charge  
above what they owe the empire.  
Jericho is a big city  
and thus a major center of taxation,  
so Zacchaeus has numerous underlings  
to collect on his behalf.  
He was not hurting for money or possessions.  
But, he is touched by Jesus,  
just a short conversation with Jesus  
and he is repenting of his sin and making restitution.  
“Look, half of all 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.”  
The proud Pharisee in the first scripture reading  
reminds God of his faithful tithing,  
but Zacchaeus offers half of his substantial wealth to the poor.  
Unlike the first tax collector  
who simply prayed for mercy,  
but gave no inclination he was going to change his ways,  
Zacchaeus is very certainly changing what he does.

As I mentioned earlier,  
a person's life must reflect  
that he or she confesses Jesus Christ as Lord,  
and in Zacchaeus' case,  
he is quite literally putting his money where his mouth is,  
or putting his money where his heart is.

We are not extremely rich like Zacchaeus,  
but we are very wealthy in terms of most of the world.  
I am not telling you that you need to go out  
and give half of your possessions away,  
I am not saying that you need to give half of all your money away,  
but if we seriously consider what we have,  
both our money and our possessions,  
we might realize that we are closer to Zacchaeus  
than we are comfortable with.  
Hopefully, this look will help us to make small changes  
in living out our faith.  
Maybe when we spend money on something we want,  
not necessarily what we need,  
we put the loose change into the little box on the counter  
that supports children with illnesses,  
or pay that extra dollar for a paper shoe  
that supports a variety of walks –  
diabetes, cancer, march of dimes, domestic violence.  
Maybe we stop for the firemen at stoplights  
or roll our windows down to the person standing at the off ramp.  
It doesn't take a Zacchaeus like effort

to make a big difference in the world,  
because as much as it is about  
Zacchaeus giving away his money,  
it is more about the change in Zacchaeus' heart  
toward those who are less fortunate than he is.

I am an optimist, I am trusting,  
and maybe I am even a little bit naïve,  
but I believe that no one chooses to have to beg for money.  
Something has happened,  
maybe an illness, maybe a job loss,  
maybe an addiction, maybe, maybe, maybe,  
but no one wants to be on the street.

A little change of heart toward our fellow children of God,  
just a fraction of Zacchaeus' reaction to Jesus,  
can indeed make a difference in the world.

One scholar said,  
"Luke's concern for the proper use of wealth  
is no mere indictment of rich people  
or an ascetic preference for poverty.  
It is a matter of distributive justice."

A justice that we as followers of Jesus  
should be just as concerned about as Luke.

Finally, the last theme we see in this passage  
that is important to Luke  
is the presence of God's salvation in the world.  
The crowds grumble as Jesus meets with the people he does,

they criticize him for associating with  
the (now former) tax collector.

But Jesus says,

“Today salvation has come to this house,  
because he too is a son of Abraham.

For the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.”

No one, not the prisoner, not the greedy CEO,  
not the drug addict, not the owner of the shady mortgage company,  
no one is beyond the salvation of God.

Zacchaeus, whose name derives from the Hebrew  
for clean or innocent,  
is in the end declared saved.

Salvation has come to his house because he has repented,  
changed his ways, and come to follow Jesus.

So perhaps we love the story because Zacchaeus was short.

Or we love it because he decided a look at Jesus  
was more important than his dignity  
and shimmied up the tree.

Or we love it because a known sinner  
repented of his evil ways  
and repaid all that he had stolen.

But, perhaps we love the story because Zacchaeus  
was brave enough to change his way of life,  
his social standing, his wealth,  
everything to embrace the love of God.



And maybe, just maybe,  
if we find a little bit of that courage Zacchaeus had  
in our world today,  
we could superimpose Jesus into our story.  
Just maybe we could have Jesus at our house,  
and just maybe we could be recorded as one of the extremes,  
the faithful believers,  
that appear in Jesus ministry.

Amen.