

...not to condemn, but...

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Luke 19:1-10

I remember as a small child, the joy and excitement my brother and I felt as the time grew closer for the annual Christmas parade. It was always on Saturday afternoon and we were always among the last to arrive in town for the parade, because our hairdresser mom had to work until noon. It seemed we were the shortest people present and we never could get to the front to sit on the curb. And so, mom and dad took a ladder, set it up in the back of the crowd, and we sat on top, with the best views in town!

Zac·chae'us was short – short, rich, and despised! And – Jesus was coming through town.

It was Passover time which meant that *tens of thousands* of Jewish pilgrims were coming down from Galilee, going *around* Samaria because it was unsafe, and coming through the toll booth at Jericho and paying their taxes. Researchers tell us that *two or three million people* showed up for the Passover. It was like the Bar-B-Q festival in Lexington a few weeks ago, *with thousands showing up (only on steroids)!* Jesus, also, was making this trip, from up north in Galilee, coming south through Jericho to Jerusalem.

It was like Circus time. Jesus had become a circus star. Jesus had raised Lazarus from the dead, healed Bartimaeus of his blindness and turned the water into wine. If you can turn water into wine, you become a circus star, a super star. Jesus had superstar status, and the tens of thousands of people passing through the toll gates at Jericho wanted to see Jesus.

But Zac·chae'us was short, rich and despised and he couldn't see Jesus in such a crowd; he needed to get higher, someplace higher to see over the crowds. He didn't have a stepladder- but he saw a sycamore tree, right there on the side of the road that Jesus was traveling.

Zac·chae'us ran ahead and cleverly climbed that sycamore tree.

We had a sycamore tree in our yard when I was a child. They are tall – some 50 to 75 feet tall and their branches stretch wide – some 50 feet wide. It has large leaves, like a maple or an oak tree. A sycamore tree is a shade tree. Zac·chae'us climbed up, took out his bag of popcorn or pomegranates, his bottle of pop and he waited.

But in the words of Dianna Butler Bass, "Zac·chae'us thought he had to look up, go higher to see Jesus, however, when Jesus found Zac·chae'us he asked him to come down and to sit at table with him."

Zac·chae'us could see the donkey and The Man through the leaves, coming up the road. People were shouting, "Hosanna to the Son of David." Wow! What a seat. And then the donkey stopped right beneath his branch. What luck. My friends will never believe it. A

ring-side seat. Sure enough, here came Jesus. Just like Zac·chae'us had planned. Or was it?

This healer and the least popular member of the Jericho Rotary Club meeting in this extremely large crowd seems coincidental, almost casual. But there are a couple of not-so-casual details. Jesus seems to know just the right spot under just the right tree...was this meeting Zac·chae'us' plan or the plan of Jesus to seek out this short, rich, despised man?

We don't have the answers to those questions, however Jesus looked up and said, "Zac·chae'us, you come down, for I'm coming to your house this day." You know the song from childhood. "Zac·chae'us, you come down, for I am coming to your house today." Another unanswered question - How did Jesus know this man? You know Zac·chae'us must have asked himself that question, "How does he know *my* name? ... How would he know *me*? ... *Why me*? ... What does he want *with me*?"

Zac·chae'us quickly slid down the tree, the buttons bursting from his shirt with pride. "Jesus, I would be honored to have you come to my home, the loveliest villa in Jericho, right down there overlooking the river." As Zac·chae'us sashayed to his house, everyone was gawking at Jesus *and* Zac·chae'us too, which pleased Zac·chae'us immensely.

But the crowds weren't too pleased with Jesus' choice of a new found friend. Zac·chae'us was the most despised man in Jericho, a crook, a cocky little crook. Not only was he a tax collector at the toll booth; he was the *chief* tax collector. The *big* boss. The *richest* man in town. He worked for the Roman government, collecting their taxes, and Zac·chae'us would pay the tax, for his own personal benefit. If there was an immoral skunk in town, Zac·chae'us was the man. A thief, a con man, but untouchable because he was protected by the Roman government. What a poor choice Jesus made.

The two of them went into Zac·chae'us' home. We are not privy to any of their conversation. In a matter of a few moments, Zac·chae'us was going to come out of that house a *changed* man, and we don't know what Jesus said to him. If we knew what Jesus said, then maybe we could say the same things and people could be changed in our work places or our neighborhoods, or even our families. What do you say when you are sittings get at table with the Son of God?

When we come to the table of Our Lord, when we sit with Jesus, we confess our sins and admit our need for God's forgiveness. "Look, half of my possessions, Lord. I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything good, I will pay back four times as much." Repentance of his sinful actions...

To which Jesus responded, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is the son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

There it is – the moral of this story. According to one theologian, "One possible moral of this story is to realize that salvation does not require, nor result in, perfection. Salvation in

this lifetime is a process - the healing and reconciling that is needed for creating right relationships within which compromised, impure, and sinful people – like us – can live – in response to, and toward, the realm of God."

Thus ends one of the most beautiful stories in the Bible, about a short little man who climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, a story about a man who was transformed from greedy to generous, from selfish to selfless, from a thieving heart to a heart of thanksgiving. Salvation, we know is not about works, but when salvation comes to a person, and invites them to sit at table, the life of that invited guest is radically changed.

Perhaps you are looking at the backs of other people and cannot see the lord as he comes your way - maybe you need to find a tree to climb.

Or, maybe you think you must seek Jesus, when it is Jesus who is seeking you. Maybe you simply need to be still so that you can be at table with the Son of God.

No matter, we must all be reminded that the Son of God did not come into the world to condemn the world, or you or me, but Jesus came that the world, you, me, and all the others, might through him be saved. Amen.