

Pentecost 21C 30 October 2022
Luke 19:1-10
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
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Grace to you and peace from Holy Trinity: God our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

He [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax-collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. Let's pray:

Play the YouTube clip: “♪ Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he ♪.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=htkKcg2THKg> [1.02] accessed 19 October 2022.

Did any of you sing this little ditty in your Sunday School days? It's simple and sweet, yet, it says something about the Zacchaeus living inside each one of us; wee little men and women. Regardless of how tall we might be, our lives are often “short in stature.” We all carry something of Zacchaeus in our lives.

The way Zacchaeus has been characterised historically, gives us the impression that he was vertically challenged. Whereas, “short in stature” is a loose translation of a phrase [ἡλικία μικρὸς ἦν – literally translated: in stature small he was] that describes a person's spiritual condition. Zacchaeus may have been short in physical height, but St Luke's point in today's gospel is more a statement about Zacchaeus' lack of spiritual maturity/faith/trust in God. It's something we share as part of our fallen human condition as sinners, and it's one of the threads that runs through this morning's readings.

In today's Old Testament reading, Habakkuk must have been feeling “short in stature” when he cried out “O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, but you will not listen? Or cry to you ‘Violence!’ and you will not save?” (Habakkuk 1:2).

He must surely have felt short in stature as he witnessed destruction and violence, justice that never prevails, and judgements that are perverted (Habakkuk 1:3-4). Habakkuk's world sounds no different to today's global melange. The sickness and corruption in today's world make me feel short in stature at times. I sometimes wonder whether God is listening to and observing the same things I hear and see. I know he does, but it escapes me how he tolerates it. Undoubtedly, the same way he tolerates me – for the sake of Jesus!

We also heard in the Psalm [119:141] today, the lament, "I am small and despised". That's another aspect of what it's like to be short in stature.

And in today's gospel, Zacchaeus is described as a chief tax-collector and he's rich. He's hated; an outcast to his own people. He conspires with the Roman occupiers. He cheats and steals from his own people. He's looked down upon and is despised by everyone. You might remember last week's gospel where the Pharisee thanked God that he was not like a tax-collector or others of his kind.

How about you? Has life ever cut you down to size? Have you ever felt small and insignificant, ignored and of little importance? Have you ever felt as if you just don't measure up, that you're not enough? Do you sometimes feel as though you're always on the outside, never an insider? Are you constantly trying to prove yourself, not just to others but to yourself, or even to God? Does it seem as though your life isn't growing, maturing, or deepening, and that your growth has become stunted? Maybe you wonder whether Jesus even notices you, knows who you are, knows your name. Maybe there are times when you feel powerless and overwhelmed by the circumstances of your life. Does it sometimes seem as though your value, worth, and dignity are defined by your past actions and choices? Have you ever experienced being lost and anonymous in the crowds of life? Maybe you feel as though you just aren't up to what life is asking of you.

I can recall occasions when I've been left crying and wondering how my life had sunk so low. They were times of bewilderment, numbness, and deep loneliness. And there have been many days since I was ordained and called to be your pastor that I've felt overwhelmed, uncertain, and definitely short in stature.

When I feel this way, I just want to run away and escape my life, push “rewind”, change everything. I want to jump out of my life and into another life. But I can't. It's my life and it's the only life I have. If Jesus is going to do anything new with me it has to be with my life as it is. Any attempt to escape ourselves as we are, denies Jesus anything to work with. The antidote to being short in stature isn't found in running from our life, rather; in facing our life, like Zacchaeus does in today's gospel.

Zacchaeus refuses to hide in the crowd. He refuses to run away from who he is. Instead, he climbs a sycamore tree. St Luke says he does this so he can see Jesus. But I wonder about that. What if he climbs the tree in order to be seen by Jesus? What if that's his way of facing the truth and reality of his own life? What if he isn't just climbing a tree but also the cross of his brokenness? What if Zacchaeus is offering all that he is and all that he has to Jesus? What if that is his way of confessing, “I am a sinner; this is my life; look at me; cleanse me; claim me; save me!?!”

That's exactly what Jesus does. He stops and “looks up” at Zacchaeus. It's probably the first time anyone has ever looked up to Zacchaeus. Jesus looks up at him with love and acceptance. Jesus looks up and invites himself into Zacchaeus' home and his life. He sees more than a chief tax-collector, a rich man, a man short in stature. He sees a contrite heart, faith, and an openness to dare to live differently.

In the eyes of the crowd Zacchaeus is a sinner. But in the eyes of Jesus, Zacchaeus is a son of Abraham. Zacchaeus was sought, is seen, and now is saved. Another lost sheep is returned safely to the fold.

That's what I want, too. I want to see Jesus, but, more than that, I want to be seen by Jesus even when I don't like what I see in myself. I want to know that Jesus sees more in me than I can see in myself. I want to be recognised and called by name by the glorious God who created me. I want to be reminded that I'm more than what I've become. I want to know that despite my sin, I too am a child of Abraham. I want Jesus to call me down from my tree, off the cross of my brokenness, and into a new life. I know you want that too, Saints. And guess what? Today is our day because that's exactly what the gospel of Jesus Christ and his saving love promises us, today, tomorrow, forever. Praise be to God!

Whatever it is that makes you short in stature and runs you up a tree, that's the place where Jesus stops, looks up with love and acceptance, and calls you back down to new life.

Saints, we've become so familiar with the story of Zacchaeus that when we hear his name, we tend to think only of the wee little man and maybe to some extent, acknowledge the ways that we too have fallen short of God's glory. But in doing so, we miss the greater gospel truth. We miss something that Jesus can see in Zacchaeus.

The name, Zacchaeus, comes from the Hebrew "Zakkay" [זַכַּי], which means "pure," "innocent." And that's the greater truth of today's gospel lesson. Jesus sees the purity, goodness, and holiness – the righteousness with which human beings were originally created. Jesus sees it in Zacchaeus and he sees it in you and I, even when we don't see it in ourselves or each other. Jesus looks up and calls us back to our truest selves - sons and daughters of Abraham; children of the Most High God!

"Zacchaeus," Jesus says to us, "you come down here right now. That's not who you are. That's not your place. You come down,

♪ For I'm going to your house today!

I'm going to your house today!

I'm going to your house today!♪"

So, you'd better hurry home and let him in my friends, for a truly magnificent feast awaits. It is indeed true that, "*God and man at table are sat down*" as the hymn so beautifully and rightly reminds us (LHS 841). Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.