



This is what I remember from Sunday School:

*Zacchaeus was a very little man and a very little man was he
He climbed up into the sycamore tree for Jesus he wanted to see*

*And when the Savior came that way he looked up into the tree
And said, "Zacchaeus, now you just come down for I'm coming to your house for tea."*

This is such a great story of the little chief tax-collector's encounter with Jesus and it has such good storyboarding that it can be challenging to read it from a more mature faith perspective.

Today's readings seem to continue a theme that we started last week with the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. What is it that makes us Christian? What we believe, what we do or what God does?

Zacchaeus ran ahead in order to climb into a tree so he could see Jesus. The word Luke uses for his running ahead is the same word that he uses for the shepherds running into Bethlehem after the angels told them about the baby. I wonder whether, like the shepherds, Zacchaeus had a sudden epiphany. I wonder whether as he ran to the tree and climbed up into it he was hearing choirs of angels in his head; whether this was a moment like no other in his life, a moment when suddenly he knew that everything he had hoped for was about to walk by and for once in his life he was not going to miss it.

And Jesus saw him.

Despite all the people crowding around him, Jesus saw him. I think this must have been quite different from just a casual glance. It's more like when Jesus called Nathaniel to be a disciple.

How do you know me? Nathaniel asked.

Jesus answered, "I saw you under the fig tree." (John 1:48)

Nathaniel's then declares that Jesus is the Son of God. I don't think for a moment that he had such an overwhelming response because Jesus happened to have seen him under the fig tree, but because when Jesus looked at him, Nathaniel felt seen and loved in a way that he had never known before.

I'm guessing that's what happened to Zacchaeus. Suddenly, the whole crowd fell away and all he was aware of was Jesus's gaze of deep love and deep knowing.

We all long to be truly seen and held in a deep loving way, at the same time that we fear being seen in a critical way. Most of us grew up thinking that God's tendency it to see us in a critical way – to look at our personal sins, our failings, and judge them. But in that moment, Zacchaeus experienced something quite different; he experienced himself as God's beloved. And God in Jesus was asking to come to his house.

It reminds me of that wonderful poem by the Sufi poet Hafiz:

Ever since happiness heard your name it has been running through the streets trying to find you.

And several times in the last week, God Himself has even come to my door

Asking me for your address!

Once I said, "God, I thought You knew everything. Why are You asking me where Your lovers live?"

And the Beloved replied, "Indeed, Hafiz, I do know everything.

But it is fun playing dumb once in a while. And I love intimate

chat

And the warmth of your heart's fire.”

Maybe we should make this poem into a song, I think it has potential!

How far does this refrain sound, for I know it is a Truth:

Ever since happiness heard your name, it has been running through the streets

Trying to find you.

And several times in the last week, God Himself has come to my door,

So sweetly asking for your address, wanting the beautiful warmth of your heart's fire.

So this very intimate moment between Jesus and Zacchaeus which happens in the midst of the crowd leads to a meeting at Zacchaeus' house, which we can imagine was quite palatial by 1st century standards.

The crowd were not happy – they grumbled that Jesus was going into the house of a bad person. Someone who cheated and swindled. Someone no respectable person would want to be around. If you look at Jesus' ministry this was not unusual. It seems as though people were always accusing him of hanging out with the wrong crowd.

Let us be grateful when the same accusations are thrown at us. Because God doesn't classify people the way we do. God loves each one of us equally. Jesus didn't see things the way the crowd did. He knew that Zacchaeus wasn't a saint but he also knew that he was God's beloved. Jesus saw him clearly, not through rose tinted glasses, but with a clear compassionate gaze.

Which led Zacchaeus to declare, "Look, half of 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." It's not clear if this came from generosity or from guilt, but there is something in his deep meeting with Jesus that makes him realize that he is using more than his share of the world's

resources. Part of Zacchaeus' healing process is to find within himself a desire to share his abundance.

It's interesting that a few verse earlier in the 18th chapter of Luke the rich young man asks Jesus what he needs to do and Jesus tells him to sell everything he has and give it to the poor. Here, the tax collector is only going to donate half of his estate yet Jesus declares, "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 to save the lost."

What is it that made the tax collector not a dishonest outcast but an honest son of Abraham?

This story is a bit like a film which can only show what's going on in people's minds by their body language, their words and their actions. Unless there's a narrator, we don't know what goes on inside people's minds.

We don't really know what the transformation was here. We don't know how Zacchaeus felt or how he was healed. We don't know whether he felt a strange warming in his heart or his life suddenly passed before his eyes or whether he had a unitive experience of feeling one with all beings. We simply don't know.

It is easy to think that Jesus declared him a true son of Abraham because he gave away his money. In other words, because of what he did. It's tempting to read this and say, "Aha, we are Christian because of what we do."

There is a deep connection between what we do and what we believe. The first reading we heard from Isaiah is very clear, don't practice the external trappings of your religion and think that God cares. God wants to see that old-timey religion transforming your life and, through you, transforming the structures of society. If you love God that will be lived out in the way you love your neighbors.

It is in the encounter with the divine that we are changed. Sometimes we don't think we have met with God because we don't feel any different. But we can be sure that whenever we turn toward God in humility, knowing our dependence upon God for everything, then God turns toward us. And the more we do that, the more we are healed. And the more we are healed the more we are able to live in the generous flow of abundance, giving to God and to others all that we are and all that we have. It becomes a circle of divine energy. The more that we give and forgive the closer we come to God.

The grace of God in our lives leads us to respond with generosity and the grace of God in our lives helps us to know that we are not alone and that we do not need to hoard our money or our possessions or our love or whatever it is we feel we need for security.

We are Christians because of God's grace in our lives, and that gives us the courage to live fearlessly so that what we do shows that we are people of God.

But it all starts with that encounter with God:

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the streets
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