

Out on a Limb

Luke 19:1-10

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I love the classic cartoon where someone is sitting out on a limb with a tree saw, but is positioned on the wrong side of the saw such that he is in for a mighty fall, but is totally unconscious of the imminent danger. It makes being out on a limb something to avoid.

But in the case of Zacchaeus, being out on a limb is the beginning of his salvation! He appears to be desperate. He is lonely. He is miserable. His life is in the pit. He knows of no place to turn. He has run out of options. He's at the end of his rope. Desperate people do desperate things. Evidently, he has heard that a remarkable young fellow will be passing through his town, a man with a reputation for being a different kind of a doctor, a different kind of a human being. And so, out of desperation for a new lease on life, Zacchaeus, the local tax collector, short of stature, climbs a sycamore tree, goes out on the proverbial limb, to catch a glimpse of this traveling shaman.

If someone were to call up to him, "Zacchaeus, what are you doing up in the sycamore tree?" he might not be able to give a definitive answer. He might not really know why he's up there. He just is. He needs something, and he can't put his finger on the something.

Can you picture him out there on the limb? He is a tax collector. He is wearing a Brooks Brothers suit, a button down shirt, a tie from Trimmings of London, and a Rolex watch. He is awkward out there on the limb, not used to climbing trees.

He didn't grow up on a farm like Robert Frost did, climbing birch trees in winter time and swinging them down to the ground as if they were old friends.

As Jesus comes along the main street, he can't help but notice this fish out of water, this tax collector out on a limb, this wretch of a human being yearning for something he can't even name. He notices Zacchaeus and calls to him to come down; the limb has served its purpose. 'You've got my attention! Let's go to your house and have a talk.' By the time they've had a little lunch and completed their conversation, Jesus says, "Today, salvation has come to this house."

Salvation. For Zacchaeus, salvation has to do with making things right with his neighbors. It has to do with admitting he's been ripping them off. It has to do with choosing to walk into the future on the more excellent path, the path where people matter more than profits, where doing the right thing matters more than doing the expedient thing.

This brief encounter with Jesus at the home of Zacchaeus is a profound study in transformation. It is not so much what Jesus **says** to this man. It is not so much what Jesus **does** for this man. It is what transpires within Zacchaeus' own heart while in the presence of Jesus. When I think of Jesus as the embodiment of love, I see that it is in the presence of love that any of us has the opportunity to experience a transformation. Not in the presence of fear or threat or ultimatum, only in the presence of LOVE. Not all of us are tax collectors. Not all of us have ripped off our neighbors. But there is a little of Zacchaeus in all of us. There is a part of all of us that longs for things to be different, a part of us that is willing to risk going out on a limb to find that one thing that is often hard to name.

The Good news of the Gospel is simply this: In the presence of love, light penetrates our darkness; in the presence of love, joy makes in-roads into our sorrow; in the presence of love, despair gives way to hope. In the presence of love, old grudges can be released. For those of us in the Christian tradition, Jesus Christ is that presence of love. In his presence, at his table, salvation becomes a possibility.

For Zacchaeus, salvation had to do with making things right with his neighbors. The Apostle Paul says we all have to work out our own salvation. It is our work to name whatever it is that holds us back from being truly whole, truly free, truly living the abundant life.

So, in a way, the invitation is to go ahead and climb that sycamore tree; go out on that limb. Do whatever we have to do to be in the presence of God's steadfast love; for, in that presence we find what we need; we find our salvation.

For centuries, scholars have debated how it is that Christ is present at the Communion table, whether literally or figuratively or symbolically or metaphorically. What I know is that Christ is present at the Table in some mysterious way that is millions of miles beyond my comprehension. His love is real and undeniable at the Table. Thus, it is at the Communion Table that we are like Zacchaeus, open to the possibility of transformation, open to the possibility that having dined with Jesus he might announce to us as he did to the tax collector, "Today, salvation has come to this house."

In closing, I am going to do something I have never done before in my professional life. I am going out on a limb here. I am going to sing a song I learned in Vacation Bible School a million years ago. I sing this song in the greatest of hope.

“Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.

And the Lord said, ‘Zacchaeus, come down! For I’m going to your
house today. For I’m going to your house today.’ Amen.