

I Talk to the Trees

from the pulpit of

Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church

Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania

by

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Reading: Luke 19:1-10

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When Lerner and Lowe were writing a particular song for *Paint Your Wagon*, I think it fair to say they did not have this story of Jesus and Zacchaeus in the back of their minds. There is no reason to expect that of them. But their song, "I Talk to the Trees" came to mind as I thought about Jesus in Luke's story. There he is, standing at the foot of a Sycamore tree, talking to a tree where a man, named Zacchaeus, happens to be sitting on a limb. He has climbed up there to better see Jesus among the crowd below.

As I read the story again this week I thought, I have something in common with that fellow in *Paint Your Wagon*: As with his experience,

whenever I talk to the trees, they don't listen to me. Even if there were someone in the tree, sitting on a limb, I have no reason to believe he or she would be inclined to listen to me either.

But when Jesus talks to this tree in which a man is sitting it is no romantic ramble filled with wishful thinking that someone to love would appear in his life. This is a strategic address by Jesus to a particular individual. Jesus expects Zacchaeus to listen to him and has little doubt that he will: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today."¹

I am struck by the contrast between this powerful directive that changed a man's life indefinitely and the musings of the rambling cowboy in Lerner and Lowe's innocent little song. I couldn't help thinking that much of our problem in the church today is that our expectations of self and others are about as low and wishful and unfocused as are those of the cowhand who wants to fall in love. Rather than walking out of worship with the expectation that the presence of God in our lives is transformational we wander along in the dreamy hope that something miraculous may happen in days to come that will get everyone's attention, turning them toward God.

But the truth is that something miraculous has already happened: Jesus has entered human history, he has come down our road and he has

¹ v.5, Elizabeth Johnson's trans.

called us by name. The question then becomes, have we heard him call to us, promising to transform our living, inviting himself into our distracted, dreamy lives?

When Jesus looks up in the trees and sees a needful man with potential to do good he does not hesitate to catch him in the cross hairs of his scope, shocking him into the reality of the moment as he calls him by name and tells him what he wants from him. While we waste time dreaming at the trees, Jesus makes use of the time he has by acting in the life of this man, Zacchaeus. Is there a lesson in this for us?

II

As we looked at different facets of this text in the Tuesday noon study group we asked, “What do you think happened the next day as Zacchaeus went to work at his tax collecting office?” We have already heard him declare, to none other than Jesus, that he will turn things around in the way he works with clients. Not only are we led to believe that Zacchaeus recognizes that God has entered his life, he makes a declaration of faith that his life will be different. He says to Jesus, “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.” (v. 8)

One commentator says that here we see Zacchaeus admitting “his shakedown of his neighbors as theft, not just taxation, and he repents of it.” We assume, therefore, that the next day and those following he hangs a new shingle outside his office door. It says something like, “Tax Collection the Old Fashioned Way: Honest and Fair”.

We want to stick our head in the door to say, “Way to go Zack. That wasn’t so hard, now, was it?” Oh, how smug we are, and how easy we find it to see the reforms someone else needs to make while casting a blind eye to those we need to make. We could make a list for those we know, from family members to fellow workers to politicians hoping to be elected next week.

But in our more reflective moments we know how courageous Zacchaeus was to do what he did. He gave his life to Jesus, to put it in the old evangelical language. He cut out all the excuses for living and working less than honestly, and he pledged to change his ways. He made a confession of his need for what only God could give and then he made a declaration of intent to live a transformed life. So we assume that his days following Jesus’ visit to his house were not like his days before he climbed into the Sycamore tree. He was a new man.

III

I sometimes have this fantasy that I will be invited to address the Wall Street Rotary Club at a luncheon. In the fantasy one of my

parishioners is a member of the club and he has invited me to give the token religious meditation as the (non-specified) holidays begin in December. (“We have a mixed audience of faith traditions so you will want to be sensitive to that”, he says). Of course, by all means, certainly. Nothing that will offend. Just a nice little story or two and then sit down. I understand. But what about raising a few questions to give them something to think about?

In this fantasy I always wonder if I would just “talk to the trees” or would I have the courage to tell them a parable in which they would see themselves as power brokers in the light of God’s truth, much as Nathan the prophet (as in “Thou art the man”) did before King David? I think it is a question any one of us could ask ourselves: “Do I have the courage to speak truth to power in the various arenas in which we live and work?”

Or, if you were invited to write an essay on the Op-Ed page of the newspaper what topic would you address? And would you call an issue or dilemma by name with every expectation that the persons or entities named would think about transforming their ways? And what would your topic be? Would it be global warming, fairness toward immigrants, religious charlatans, posturing politicians, marketplace greed, corporate duplicity? Who needs to come down out of the trees for a meeting with the truth? Probably each of us to a greater of lesser extent is a candidate for coming down to earth for such a conversation. I’m wondering to

what extent any of us is ready to be the one on the ground confronting the ones in the trees. “Zacchaeus, come down, for I must talk to you.”

IV

I feel as though I have punched a hole in the simple story of Zacchaeus up in a tree. Yet it is a story with several layers and within those various layers we find responses *and* defenses, excuses *and* commitments that become points of contact for us. There is some of Zacchaeus in each of us: We want to see God but we hesitate to make a commitment. We want to know what’s going on but we hope it will be someone else’s job to make the first move. We truly love to be called by name but when God in Christ is doing the calling we are too afraid to move. We prefer to stay in the trees.

But there is also some of Jesus in each of us. It is not as though we have not been listening and learning over the years. We sometimes exercise a Jesus-like insight and penetrate to the heart of a matter. Sometimes we are the ones calling others out of the trees, desiring to have a conversation with them on common ground.

Zacchaeus is a model of a response any of us could make when confronted with the truth that is of God: He watches, he listens, and he makes his move...toward God. It takes courage but it can transform your life...and the life of others.

Thanks be to God.