

# Defining Words of Faith: 8

## *Discipleship*

by

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Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. <sup>2</sup>A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. <sup>3</sup>He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. <sup>4</sup>So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. <sup>5</sup>When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” <sup>6</sup>So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. <sup>7</sup>All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” <sup>8</sup>Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “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.” <sup>9</sup>Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”



I'd like to think it the hand of Providence that on this Sunday where we dedicate our pledges for the coming year, we hear the story of the righteousness of a tax collector. If only because it gives me a bit of cover.

Of course, today is also Reformation Sunday, evidenced by the liturgical color, and while we did not plan to be wearing red for the Phillies, we are certainly covering our bases this morning. In this sermon series on the defining words of faith, we come today to the word that expresses our identity as Christians: discipleship. Primarily, discipleship is understood as the culmination of a life that yields to the way of Jesus Christ.

Yet what does discipleship have to do with our text? How do we imagine such a life in relationship with Christ as compared to this brief and somewhat odd vignette? What does Zacchaeus have to do with us?

It's worth noting just how much Luke shares about this man. The narrative tells us about his job, his social status, and even offers a physical description. He is a chief tax collector. He is rich. And he is short. Luke doesn't tell us any of those things by accident. They aren't just adjectives that help move the story along. Luke wants us to stumble a bit over each one, I think.

The fact that we are told Zacchaeus is a tax collector, a much-despised position in Judea for being one of Rome's patsies, lets us know right off the bat that we shouldn't much feel sorry for this man.

He's not just any tax collector though, he's one of the top dogs. He's a managing partner of this national fraud. Which of course means he's rich. He's made his fortune off of the backs of his fellow countrymen for the sake of the dominating empire.

He is not a sympathetic character. And then of course there's his height. Ironically, that is the only fact that I ever learned about him when

my second grade Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Maxwell, taught me that classic children's Bible song. I'll spare you my baritone voice, but all I really knew about Zacchaeus was that he was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he.

What does it matter that he's short in stature? According to antiquity, a lot. The New Testament rarely provides physical descriptions of its characters. It may stand to reason that Luke tells us this fact as an explanation why he ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a tree in order to see Jesus.

But in the Greco-Roman world, examples abound of the derision that is directed towards small-statured people. From Lucilius to Ovid, physical difference was routinely marginalized in ancient poems and writings.

It stands to reason that when we hear about Zacchaeus, we are invited to see him as a rather pathetic person. He's not someone we want to emulate. We have nothing to gain by befriending him or wanting to get to know him better. Sometimes we need to be reminded of the derision of characters, in the past and the present, to begin to glimpse what God is up to.

In any event, he hears Jesus is coming to town. And when he sees the movement of the crowd, he knows that his chance is about to pass. He finds the closest tree he can, and like a light pole in Center City after an Eagles game, he climbs it.

The scene is meant to be comical. Here is this man, up in the branches of a tree, gawking at Jesus like he's one of the Beatles. And the text says in the Common English Bible, "When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up..."

I don't know what Zacchaeus saw exactly when he beheld that face, but I can imagine what his insides were doing when it seemed as if this man he was desperate to see seemed just as desperate to see him.

Have you ever experienced that? It's the look you have, and the way you feel when you get lost in the park as a small child, and the only thing you want in the world is to lay eyes on your momma, and it turns out that's the only thing she wants in the world. And then you see each other. And all of the sudden you didn't know how truly lost you were until you knew you were found.

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Jesus calls him by name, and tells him to come down. He says, "for I must stay at your house today." Of course, that's when the crowd begins to grumble. We always grumble when someone is offered grace. We like to receive it ourselves, but it starts to grate on us when folks we don't believe are worthy of grace start getting free handouts. "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner," they snarl, loud enough for Zacchaeus to hear them.

Depending on how you translate the Greek here Zacchaeus makes a confession of sorts. "Look," he says, "Half of everything I have I will give to the needy. And If I am guilty of fraud, I will pay back it fourfold." It could also be translated because of the verb tense here: "Half of everything I have I'm *already giving* to the needy..." Which sounds more defensive than confessional.

Regardless, I'm not sure Jesus even needed to say what he does next, about salvation coming to this man's house, because I think Zacchaeus and the crowd both knew it. Jesus is simultaneously the invited guest and the self-invited guest. He comes to those who seek him out and also to those whom he seeks out. And who does Jesus seek out? According to Luke he seeks out the ones we would never expect.

He seeks out the repentant and perhaps even the unrepentant alike. He comes for the stranger, the wayward children, the mad, and the traitorous. He chases after the deranged, the confused, the lonely, and the self-righteous. He seems not to care whether you are filthy rich or dirt poor, man or woman, Jewish or Gentile, young or old, or something in between all of that.

And once we begin to wrap our own little heads around the fact that the God of all creation is desperate to know and be known by us, to love us into restoration and redemption...well what else can we do but want to go where that God is going.

But let's get one thing straight, following Jesus is hardly the act of always walking in a linear fashion. Look at the disciples themselves. Frederick Buechner wrote that "There is no evidence that Jesus chose them because they were brighter or nicer than other people.

In fact, the New Testament record suggests that they were continually missing the point, jockeying for position, and when the chips were down, interested in nothing so much as saving their own skins. Their sole qualification seems to have been their initial willingness to rise to their feet when Jesus said, 'Follow me.'"<sup>1</sup>

You see what both the Bible and the church want primarily to affirm is that in Jesus Christ God brings forgiveness, liberation, reconciliation, and new life to the world. What we preachers stammer and sputter up here Sunday after Sunday is to say that a life worth living is a life measured up against his.

Not because we are saying that his life is the only life worth imitating, but that in his life is the full imitation of God. To follow him is therefore to go where he goes and love what he loves. It is to take

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<sup>1</sup> Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABC*, Rev. and expanded [ed.]. (San Francisco, Calif.: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 74.

risks in doing so, in the same manner that his love for us is risky. You might not know this, but we aren't always a sure bet.

As the pastor of stewardship, I hear a lot of finance terms thrown around. Most of the time I chuckle along with the experts here as they joke about dividends and low yield bonds, but I don't have a clue what they are talking about. I learned my first year here about the metrics involved in measuring an ROI, return on investment. I would hate to think what my ROI would be if God measured my life. Was I worth it? Are you? According to Jesus, the answer seems to always be yes.

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A couple of months ago, many of you no doubt saw the news about a group of some 50 Venezuelan migrants who were flown to Martha's Vineyard. When they landed, they had nowhere to go. Political theatrics aside, it was the action of the local Episcopal church that left a lump in my throat.

A parishioner reached out to their rector about the new visitors. The priest was off-island, down somewhere in North Carolina I believe, when he heard his parishioner's voice on the other end of the line. "Father, do you think we can take some of these folks in? Just for a little while?"

"No," the pastor said. "No, we can't take some of them in...we can take all of them in." Now how is a little church going to do that? House 50 people? Try to figure out how to cross cultural barriers of language and custom to clothe, feed, and shelter 50 people? 1 Corinthians says, "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise." Discipleship is something like that.

Zacchaeus may be doing his best to tell us that discipleship is the process of trying to see who Jesus is, and then being so taken by his presence, that we make a foolhardy vow to follow him. We know it isn't easy. Following Jesus is the messy work of making a promise to be more

faithful every day and still falling short. It's often two steps forward and three steps back.

That's why Calvin wrote that in this way of living, "let us not despair at the slightness of our success."<sup>2</sup> It's worth remembering that when John Calvin cuts anyone slack, it's a rather encouraging sign that something will be challenging.

We don't follow Christ because we want to be perfect, we follow him because we are haunted by his perfect and nearly shameful love for us, for all of us, and our lives are lived in response to that love. Discipleship points to the hard worn edges of a life lived with mercy, grace, forgiveness, and generosity. It's a life that can only be lived when it's given away, sometimes as much as fourfold. It is a life that is so other-centered that it borders on self-destructive. Maybe you are, but I don't know if I am fully ready for that.

I don't know if I can give my all to that, but I will give what I can. And maybe, I don't know, but maybe God can do something with our half-measures, our missteps, our false starts. Maybe God can do something with our feeble attempts to live as people who know we are loved, who once were lost, and now are found.

Maybe if nothing else we can just find the closest branch and hang on for dear life until the Savior makes his way to us and looks at us with that face that holds the hopes and fears of all the years.

Maybe Zacchaeus is right; maybe discipleship is our decision to go out on a limb and see where God is heading. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Thomas McNeill, The library of Christian classics (Louisville, Ky. London: Westminster John Knox Press, 20), 689.