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First Presbyterian Church, Athens, Georgia
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Text: Luke 19:1-10

Tree Man

It's still there. I saw it: the tree that Zacchaeus climbed. At least the local guide in Jericho claimed it was the very tree that Zacchaeus climbed. It's a sycamore, a member of the fig family. It stands behind an iron fence at the intersection of two roads. Its trunk is whitewashed the way I remember seeing trees painted in the rural South growing up. It was definitely an old tree with a spreading canopy. Its trunk was so large that I doubt two people could hug it and touch hands.

After our pilgrimage group moved on from the sycamore tree headed toward a key archeological site in what's claimed to be the world's oldest continually inhabited city, the Old Testament professor accompanying us said, "Yes, that's Zacchaeus's tree. Just like I have my great grandfather's ax. My grandfather had to replace the handle. And my father had to replace the blade. But it's still my great grandfather's ax."

The tree is such an interesting detail in the story we heard from Luke. Luke, by the way, is the only gospel writer that tells this story. I've preached on this story three other times, and each time I've been struck by something different. I wanted to reuse (or repurpose as we say now) one of those sermons today so I wouldn't have to write another one. One reason I switched from being a solo pastor who preaches every week to an associate pastor who preaches once a month is so I wouldn't have to write so many sermons. For me, writing a sermon is like a wrestling match. But I couldn't stop thinking about the tree. That's the way the Spirit works—at least the way She works on me, egging me into the ring.

I suppose the tree in the gospel story jumped out at me this time because we've been playing for months with the image of a tree along with the theme "Rooted & Reaching" based on a verse from Colossians. We've decorated and redecorated the wrought iron tree in the atrium five times so far, the latest with our cards of thanksgiving. We've sung about trees in our gathering song. I pass twenty times a day the impressive wall hanging of the tree on the bulletin board opposite my office door. Not to mention the real trees that populate our fair city and surround our homes which I love.

So we have Zacchaeus in the tree, in a sycamore tree. Maybe we've all heard the story so many times we don't stop to think what a *daring thing* it was for him to be there. After all, he was a grown man in a traditional first century culture. Plus he was a prominent man, a *chief* tax collector, meaning he was a big cheese and had others working for him. And on top of that Zacchaeus was a rich man. So there were certain things that men of his standing just did not do, whether they were height-challenged, or not, and hoist their robes to scale a tree was one of them. Running was another. Yet Luke tells us that Zacchaeus did both. "He was trying to see who Jesus was but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way."

I got to thinking, What would have happened if Zacchaeus had not scampered ahead and scrambled up the tree? Maybe nothing. He would have been stuck in the back of the crowd

studying shoulder blades and bad haircuts, a crowd that wasn't keen to let him through since he was, after all a tax collector, and tax collectors were not popular since the Jews viewed them as collaborators with their Roman oppressors. He would not have caught Jesus' eye. He would not have had Jesus to dinner. He would still have the same bank balance. He would still be ostracized. He simply would have turned and gone home after the parade as the same ol' same ol' person, maybe disappointed, but basically unchanged.

But something moved Zacchaeus to take a risk. Something moved him to ditch his dignity and risk ridicule and embarrassment and literally go out on a limb. There was a desire in him to see this young rabbi that doubtless he had heard about. Everybody had heard about him. He was creating a stir. He healed the blind. He cast out demons. He taught with striking stories and profound wisdom.

But maybe what Zacchaeus was most curious about was Jesus' unusually friendly attitude toward tax collectors. Whereas everyday folks resented tax collectors, the Pharisees and teachers of the law regarded folks with Zacchaeus's job as unclean since it meant regular interface with Gentiles. That meant that they could not participate in Jewish community life. By contrast, Jesus did not reject tax collectors. On the contrary, he had a reputation for hanging out with tax collectors and others his fellow Jews labelled as sinners. One of his disciples, they said, was a tax collector named Levi. Maybe Zacchaeus had heard the parable Jesus had told about a tax collector and a Pharisee going to the temple to pray. And guess what! It was the tax collector, not the Pharisee, who came out smelling like a rose in that story. Any preacher with a story like that, Zacchaeus wanted to see.

So curiosity, maybe; or perhaps something deeper, a longing that was hard to put his finger on, propelled Zacchaeus to want to *see* Jesus.

Sight is a big metaphor throughout the gospels. Often it means insight as much as physical sight. It can mean understanding, the kind of understanding that leads to discipleship. That's the gist of the story Luke tells just before this one. Jesus asks a blind man what he wants him to do for him. The blind man replies, "Lord, let me see again." And when he could see again, the man followed Jesus. His sight led to discipleship, his insight to a reorientation of his life.

The desire to see (whatever motivated it) propelled Zacchaeus to let go of his dignity and climb up the tree. I imagine Zacchaeus as one of those short men who carry themselves like royalty, making up with dignity what they lack in height. But Zacchaeus laid aside his pride which he was so accustomed to wearing. He did something that made him very vulnerable. For a fleeting moment as he clambered up, he felt like a young boy again. That's certainly the last time he had climbed a tree. But that was then. Now, returning to his senses, he found himself, a grown man, straddling a limb in that sycamore, his linen robe ripped, sweat beading on his forehead. He felt like he might as well be sitting there without a stitch on. It was such an obvious admission that he was short. Being short, of course, was something he couldn't control. But it's hard for anyone, especially anyone who is a *chief* anything, to admit that they are not totally in control. Further, it was an exposure of this longing, this desire he couldn't quite articulate. He was quite vulnerable.

What does vulnerability feel like for you? Brene Brown is a research professor who has spent years studying vulnerability, courage, worthiness and shame. She's interviewed hundreds of people asking them to complete this sentence: Vulnerability is _____. Here are some of the replies she heard:

Vulnerability is sharing an unpopular opinion, standing up for myself, asking for help, starting my own business, calling a friend whose child just died, the first date after divorce, getting fired, falling in love, showing a piece of art I made, waiting for the biopsy to come back, asking for forgiveness, and having faith. When asked, “How does vulnerability feel?” the answers were powerful: It’s taking off the mask and hoping the real me isn’t too disappointing, not sucking it in anymore, it’s where fear and courage meet, being all in, baring your belly in the face of your enemy, letting go of control, going out on a limb, a very, very high limb.

Interestingly, she found that we love seeing raw truth and openness in other people, but we’re so afraid to let them see it in us

Brown was invited to give a TED talk, one of those 15 minute speeches before a live audience which is broadcast on the internet to thousands. She was very nervous because she planned to share some of her own life story which included some revelations that made her feel quite exposed. She says that as she walked on stage, she took a deep breath and recited her vulnerability prayer: Give me the courage to show up and let myself be seen.

I love that prayer: Give me the courage to show up and let myself be seen.

It is the showing up and being seen that is at the heart of what Brown calls wholehearted living. The gospel word for wholehearted living is salvation. When we are saved, we are seen for who we are; we are accepted. Salvation is being found worthy and lovable in spite of everything. But it also means being healed and transformed by the grace which beholds us. It has to do with wholeness--our whole person—our body, soul, relationships, work, finances, everything. It is being found when you are lost. It is being included instead of excluded.

So Zacchaeus was vulnerably perched in the sycamore, peering through the leaves, hoping to see Jesus when, lo and behold, it’s the other way around. Jesus spies him. Jesus calls him by name, tells him to hurry down the tree, and invites himself over saying, “for I must stay at your house today.” Suddenly the tables are turned. It turns out that though Zacchaeus was seeking Jesus, Jesus was about the business of seeking all the Zacchaeuses of the world, people who have been misplaced, who are not where they belong, who are in some sense lost, who have somehow lost out on the blessing of how life is supposed to be.

When Zacchaeus is seen, he is thrilled to welcome this famous holy man into his home. The crowds begin to grumble. Zacchaeus was used to their grumbling at him. But now they were grumbling at Jesus, unhappy that he was to be the guest of one they considered beyond the pale—a sinner.

Next comes the most remarkable turn in the story. In the company of these grumbling folks who are calling him a sinner, Zacchaeus turns to Jesus and declares that he will give half of his possessions to the poor and repay anyone he has defrauded four times the amount. Something about this encounter with Jesus unleashes Zacchaeus’s compassion. Something about showing hospitality to this unusual rabbi who has seen him makes him remarkably generous with others. He opens his purse to the poor. He wants to set right all that has been wrong. He even goes beyond what the legal requirement for restitution would have been in order to restore the relationships he has abused.

Jesus then declares, “Today, salvation has come to this house, for he too is a son of Abraham.” Salvation—that process that involves wholeness and healing, acceptance and rescue, righting what is wrong, restoring what is excluded, finding what is lost and returning it to where it belongs—salvation has come to this one and to his household. And it came because Zacchaeus was willing to take a risk and climb a tree.

This story stands in stark contrast to another Luke tells just a chapter earlier. I think we are meant to hold the two stories side by side because of two key words they share. In Greek they are *arche* and *pluous*. *Arche* gets translated as “chief” in the Zacchaeus story (he’s a “chief” tax collector) but simply as “ruler” in this other story. And *pluous* means rich. In both stories the men are *pluous*—rich. So in the earlier story a ruler (*arche*) comes to Jesus wanting to know what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus replies, “You know the commandments: don’t commit adultery, don’t murder, don’t steal, don’t lie; honor your parents.” The man nods and declares that he has kept all this his whole life. To which Jesus says, “There’s still one thing you lack. Sell all you own and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me.”

But when the ruler heard this he became sad because he was very *pluous* (rich). He couldn’t do it. Unlike Zacchaeus, he couldn’t manage to take the risk of letting go.

Is there in you a desire to see Jesus, whatever that might mean for you? Is there a desire to seek eternal life, to live wholeheartedly, to experience the blessings of life as God meant it to be? If so (and because you are sitting here today, I believe it is so), then consider how God might be calling you to take a risk: to risk letting down your guard, risk being seen, risk being vulnerable. I had a Hungarian art teacher who used to tell me, as I had my watercolor brush nervously poised above the paper, “Dare to do it! Dare to do it!”

But if you do, watch out! Because it might lead to more joy and generosity than you ever bargained for. You might just surprise yourself at how much compassion and concern for others you really do have. You might extend hospitality in ways you never expected. Who knows, next Sunday when you bring your pledge card, it might just have a much bigger number than you had planned on!