

## Luke 19:1-10

<sup>1-4</sup> Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way—he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by.

<sup>5-7</sup> When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home." Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, "What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?"

<sup>8</sup> Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, "Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages."

<sup>9-10</sup> Jesus said, "Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost."

### Approach

The reason I decided to hold worship service outside today, besides the fact that it's a nice day, and we don't have a baptism to perform, and that the scripture lesson takes place outside, on the road to Jericho, is the fact that we are symbolically acting as Jesus, and this is the way the church should act. Jesus approaches people wherever they are, whether in the church or outside of it, and he welcomes all into that community of God, whether we like it or not. I have a few pastor friends who like to have their congregation take a moment, turn to the people next to them, and say, "I love you, and there's nothing you can do about it." (Why don't you do that right now?) I think that's a good exercise.

But the kind of love that accepts everyone is not the kind of love that everyone likes. In our story today we find Jesus coming to Jericho and he's walking through a crowd of folks who have come to see him. Jesus has a reputation as a healer, as a teacher, and as potential savior of the nation of Israel. He's a very good candidate for Messiah. They've heard about him, and they're lining up along the parade route the way people line up along the streets for the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade (How many of you have seen that parade? I understand you have to get there mighty early to find a good spot where can actually see the parade, and if you're short or late you're out of luck). Zacchaeus is out of luck. He wants to see Jesus just as everyone else does, but he has a slight disadvantage because he's short. And being the smart, resourceful man that he is he climbs a tree along the parade route to get a better view.

And everything would have gone just fine if Jesus had just waved from his float and just passed by smiling. People would say, "He looks like a nice guy; nice smile, well groomed," the way people might pass a church and say, "I like the architecture; it's got nice stained-glass windows." That could have been the end of the story. People would have been satisfied to see him, or come close to him, perhaps to shake his hand or exchange a glance.

But I don't think Zacchaeus would have been satisfied. The text says that he wanted *desperately* to see Jesus. That tells me that Zacchaeus was not satisfied in simply *seeing* Jesus walk by. There was something about Jesus that attracted Zacchaeus whether it was the liberal way that he dispensed forgiveness or the way he seemed to accept *all* people, not just the rich or powerful or influential, that he treated nobodies as if they were somebodies. Deep down Zacchaeus really did want to meet Jesus the way a Bruce Springsteen fan really *does* want to meet the boss when he goes to a concert; he knows that the chances are slim, but if he can get in front of the stage, who knows?

So the first lesson Jesus teaches us today is that he doesn't disappoint us. If you want to meet Jesus, you are going to meet him. Because Jesus is the embodiment of God's love, and God's love doesn't consider anyone as unimportant or inconsequential or unworthy of his company. If someone passing by the church really wants to come to church, the church must welcome that person. What's more is the church needs to come to that person as Jesus really came to Zacchaeus. The whole point of the incarnation was that God reached out to humanity in the form of Jesus, and the whole point of the church is that we reach out to humanity as the body of Christ. That's part of the point of meeting outdoors; we should not be confined to IN doors because we act on Christ's behalf. Jesus came to Zacchaeus just as much as Zacchaeus came to him. And rather than walking by, Jesus stopped, looked at Zacchaeus, and invited himself into Zacchaeus' home. Jesus is not timid, nor should the church be timid. People *want* to meet us; let's make ourselves known to them. Let's even be audacious enough to invite ourselves into the lives of others.

The second lesson Jesus teaches us is that not everyone is going to be happy about who the church welcomes. Zacchaeus was not the most popular guy in town. There are folks who would have rather heard Jesus put Zacchaeus in his place instead of inviting himself into Zacchaeus' home. They grumbled when Jesus got too chummy with this tax collector. It's not at all clear whether Zacchaeus repented of any sins as he stood with Jesus in front of this angry crowd; he said, "I give away half of my income to the poor, and if I'm caught cheating I pay four times the damages." That's not a confession of guilt; that's a statement of fact. He sounds like a virtuous sort of guy. You know there are some people who just get a bad rap because of their vocation – I sell used cars. I work for the IRS. How many folks do we stereotype simply because of their vocation? Zacchaeus was a tax collector; does that make him a bad guy? The point is that the crowd thinks he's bad, and they're none too pleased that Jesus is intent on hanging out with this guy. Are there churches that grumble over certain members because they're in the wrong business or they have a bad reputation? The honest answer is "yes." It's interesting that we don't know how this story ends; Jesus declares that today salvation has come to Zacchaeus' whole household, but is the crowd willing to celebrate with Zacchaeus and Jesus, or are they going to continue to grumble. If we, the church, are truly the body of Christ, we should be there to welcome the Zacchaeuses and celebrate their salvation.

I would like to offer a third lesson, because pastors are taught that every lesson has three points. The third point is that Zacchaeus be an unrepentant sinner, and that seems okay with Jesus. Earlier in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus tells a rich young man to sell what he has, give it to the poor,

and follow him, and the man goes away sad because he just doesn't have the faith to do that. Here we have Zacchaeus confess to giving *half* of his income to the poor, and IF he's caught cheating (which implies that he may cheat and just not get caught) he pays four times the damages. Despite the fact that Zacchaeus may still be living an unrepentant lifestyle, Jesus declares that salvation has come to him and his household. Do we judge others not to be "saved" because they haven't repented enough in our opinion? Does the church place conditions on salvation that Jesus did not? Or does the church accept everyone exactly where they are and celebrate them in the faith that the work that God has begun in them will reach its fruition?

This is an open-ended story. We don't know if the crowd came to accept Zacchaeus and celebrate salvation with him or if they continued to grumble and deny the legitimacy of Jesus' declaration that Zacchaeus and his household were "saved." The point is that Jesus accepted Zachaeus. He met Zachaeus outdoors, like we are now. He extended unconditional welcome to Zacchaeus even while the crowds didn't. We the church are called to meet people where they are, to accept them as they are, and to celebrate the salvation he has wrought without judging.