

## Climb a Sycamore Tree Lately?

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Gates Presbyterian Church

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Psalms 119: 137-144 and Luke 10:1-10

Zacchaeus. This was a wealthy man. He was a *chief* tax collector. In Jesus' day, this was the epitome of a successful man. He did not go without any creature comforts available in his era. He and his family had a home, had more than enough food and clothing to be at ease in life.

All was not perfect! Zacchaeus was despised by his own people, by Jewish citizenry who saw him as no better than a prostitute for being a lackey of and collaborator with the Romans, one who had sold his soul for the sake of riches and power. The common belief was that tax collectors amassed riches by taking in more than they reported to their Roman bosses. Without auditors and without anyone looking over their shoulders, tax collectors could, put simply, defraud not only their own people, but also the Romans, those hated occupiers of the Holy Land. And Zacchaeus was a *chief* tax collector who, in collusion with those who worked for him, or on his own accord, could succumb to, and get away with, corruption all the easier!

We surmise that as rich as he was, Zacchaeus was not a happy man. On one level, he sensed the disdain if not downright hatred of other citizens. On another level, perhaps he knew the unease if not discomfort that comes from that gnawing sensation that eats away at some level of one's consciousness that having it "all" isn't what it is cracked up to be, that something, indeed some vital aspect to life, might still be missing.

As a Jewish man, Zacchaeus attended Sabbath services and knew much of Hebrew Scripture. Perhaps he could recite many of the words read by the Rabbis on the Sabbath. Perhaps verses from what we call the 119<sup>th</sup> Psalm nagged him. I wonder how he heard these words:

Though I am small and despised, I do not forget your precepts.

It was bad enough that Zacchaeus was a small man, short in stature, ... and that is all some people remember from that Sunday School ditty, [organist plays first lines of the song]

Zacchaeus was a very little man and a very little man was he; he climbed up in a sycamore tree, for Jesus for to see.

But, Zacchaeus also knew – as do we - that "small" can be more than a matter of physical height, that it can say something about one's "standing" in society if not "standing" in the presence of God. And Zacchaeus knew he was despised. He knew other Jews disliked him intensely and that perhaps he was also scorned by the Romans who used him for their own purposes but may at the same time despised the character of a man so seemingly willing to do their bidding.

I wonder if these words from the Psalms got caught in Zacchaeus' craw, perhaps even irritated him – but irritated him in a way that forced him to face himself, confront his unhappiness, know that he was, to use The Rev. Harry Emerson Fosdick's words, "rich in things but poor in soul." Perhaps, he wanted, in words similar to those we just sang, to be more loving, more holy, and more like Jesus – yes, this Jesus, who was coming down the road, this Jesus for whom the crowd

was gathering, this Jesus, who he knew from public accounts, was touching peoples' hearts and souls and minds in wondrous if not challenging ways.

For whatever reason, Zacchaeus climbed that sycamore tree. As a result, his life changed forever. Oh, the crowd was sure to speak up about his being a chief tax collector and the murmurings about Jesus consorting with such people *is* part of the story – but *the* point is that Zacchaeus's life was changed as he came to know Jesus as a Man of faith, a Savior Who grants grace, all-embracing forgiveness, hope, peace and love. Having climbed a sycamore tree, Zacchaeus overcame his “smallness,” came face to face with the Son of God Who was anything but “small.”

The story of Zacchaeus suggests we step back and consider our perceptions of God, our approach to our faith, and how we might come to fully understand the majesty, wonder, power, presence, and love of our God.

The question is: “Climb a sycamore tree lately?”

- When is the last time we recognized how we might be “rich in things and poor in soul” and know that we need to seek out the wisdom and grace of our God?
- When is the last time we left the safety of the crowd and its accompanying anonymity and put ourselves “out there?” On some level, it is possible Zacchaeus thought he wouldn't be seen up there among the branches, but is it not just as possible that he was more than simply curious, and that at some level of his consciousness he *wanted* to confront his faith, ...
- When is the last time we were curious enough about our perceptions about God, Christ and the Holy Spirit, that we challenged our viewpoint, looked at our faith from a different if not broader perspective and wondered if our sense of God is all that it could be?
- When is the last time we decided to take a chance to take a hard look inward at what drives us, what moves and inspires us, what it is that is most important to us and to our lives? Zacchaeus could just as easily have kept on walking, could just as easily have looked up at that sycamore tree, thought about what it would be like to climb it, and decided to go his “merry way.” When is the last time something about our faith nagged at us to the point that we *thought about* exploring it further, but then shrugged and kept on doing what we keep on doing - .....

In his “little” book, “Your God Is Too Small” (and it is a *small* book) [holding it up], The Rev. J. B. Phillips claims most people's concept of God is too narrow, too “small,” or at least too ill-defined so as to fit their spiritual needs. In this 1952 composition that, apart from the male gender-specific language of the day, is timeless, Mr. Phillips speaks to some of the perceptions people have of God that are confined to seeing God in some of the following way (this list is not exhaustive)

- God as a “resident policeman,” as though God is nothing more than a good conscience that reminds us of the difference between right and wrong, good and evil
- God as another parent. Jesus referred to God as “Father,” but not so that we would see God as being like one of our parents but so that we would see the *relationship* we are to have with our God as intimate, personal and known.
- God as a grand old man. Remember all the images of an older, bearded, caucasian man?

- God, especially as Christ as meek and mild. Those two words wrongly suggest a timidity that Jesus certainly did not display – and some people then and now wish that Jesus had – and should have - stood up to if not zapped those who contended with him. “Meek and mild” might suggest a compliant willingness to stand before Pilate and be crucified without complaint, but J.B. Phillips thinks our misconception of Jesus as mild came about because “mild” was the only good word in the English language that rhymed with “*child!*”
- God as the epitome of “absolute perfection” – and, apparently by association, a God who expects perfection in us – which is, we should realize, unattainable.
- God as a “heavenly bosom,” as though God is no more than something to which to flee and escape.
- “God in a box,” which Mr. Phillips defines as what happens when a denomination or particular church defines God in a particular if not narrow way as though theirs is the “only” way to define God and refuses to acknowledge the wisdom and grace that might be found in other traditions.
- God as a “Managing Director” as though God is a master puppeteer that directs every act in every human’s life.
- God as one to whom one would direct “perennial grievances” which usually leads to disappointment because God has let that person down.

Mr. Phillips words are timeless, but I suggest that instead of looking at this from the perspective that our perception is of a God Who is smaller than should be true, we should embrace the truth that *we* are the ones that are “too small.” To be sure, Mr. Phillips contends it is *our* viewpoints that are skewed, that God is far greater than we can possibly imagine and more than the sum of the narrowly if not misconstrued smaller “parts” of God I just mentioned. But is not the truth that we are “small” in so many ways?

I started Wednesday evening’s Bible study by asking the class what makes a person small. As ever, the first thing that came to mind is someone who is small in stature, but how quickly we moved to talking about small as “petty,” “self-centered,” “feeling inferior” or “putting someone ‘down,’ looking at some as inferior in order to feel superior,” “small-minded,” ... There are so many ways people can be “small!” The inverse is also true, that people can act in bigger and more embracing ways. The choice is ever there. While many of us will exercise our right to vote in local elections this coming Tuesday, many of us are praying for the people of Guatemala as they go to the polls today as the top two candidates for President face each other in a run-off election. Our prayer is that people will vote for the “larger good,” that they will rise above the smallness that comes when people only take their personal needs into consideration.

For whatever reason, mere curiosity or a devout wish to understand this prophet/teacher Jesus, Zacchaeus climbed up that sycamore tree, was humbled before Jesus Who called to him by name, realized the wrong of overcharging people if not defrauding them and the Romans and recognized as in words from Psalm 119 that he was deserving of the words “small and despised.” Zacchaeus knew salvation that day. His faith in Jesus the Christ saved him. His life changed because he climbed that sycamore tree – because he took a chance.

Climb a sycamore tree lately?

Amen.