

Sermon: Obstacles
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Luke 19:1-10 Common English Bible (CEB)

A rich tax collector

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through town. A man there named Zacchaeus, a ruler among tax collectors, was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but, being a short man, he couldn't because of the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed up a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When Jesus came to that spot, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down at once. I must stay in your home today." So Zacchaeus came down at once, happy to welcome Jesus.

Everyone who saw this grumbled, saying, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

Zacchaeus stopped and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much."

Jesus said to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham. The Human One^[a] came to seek and save the lost."

Sermon: Obstacles

It's a simple enough story.

Zacchaeus is a tax collector and he is short. Wants to see Jesus. Climbs a tree. Jesus sees him. Invites himself to Zacchaeus' house. Zacchaeus turns his life around. Jesus assures him of salvation. The end.

But maybe there's more to it than that.

First of all, we always think of Zacchaeus as the short one.

I once heard a priest, who was not very tall, say that when he read this passage, he liked to think that Zacchaeus climbed that tree to see Jesus, because Jesus was the one who was short in stature. Now he was saying this in jest, but who's to say that Jesus had to be tall?

But we will stick with the usual interpretation and accept that Zacchaeus was short. He was so short he could not see over the crowd of people who were lining the street to see Jesus. I can imagine that at first he was like the person the behind lines of people lined up on a parade route – jumping up and down, trying to figure out if he would be able to see over the people's heads. Maybe he even tried standing on a rock or slight rise along the road. Nothing seemed to work.

But Zacchaeus really wanted to see Jesus. So he found the nearest solution to his problem – a sycamore tree. He ran to it so he could climb it before Jesus got there.

Now I don't know about you, but I don't think of Zacchaeus as a young man. In my mind, he had not climbed a tree in quite some time. And he was probably not very graceful or adept at climbing that tree. I imagine he looked pretty awkward. I imagine he probably got some funny looks, some laughs, and possibly some rude comments from the other people who were waiting to see Jesus.

I imagine people wondered what Zacchaeus was doing there in the first place. Why would a tax collector, a rich tax collector, a chief tax collector, someone who had betrayed his people by collecting taxes for the Romans want to see Jesus? Why would a cheat, who lined his pockets with the money he skimmed off the top when he told his Jewish neighbors that they owed more than they did, want to see Jesus? After all, weren't all tax collectors crooks?

Was Zacchaeus simply curious? Braving crowds who would have looked upon him with disdain, being humiliated as a tax collector and looking pretty foolish climbing that tree – that's a lot to go through just to get a glimpse of Jesus; for simple curiosity.

But apparently Zacchaeus was willing to deal with those things in his quest to see Jesus. He was willing to put up with all sorts of obstacles – overcoming the physical barriers of tall people and climbing a tree and the strange looks and humiliation from the town's people. And Zacchaeus had no expectation that Jesus would even notice him.

But Jesus did notice him. Jesus called to him, called him by name. It's not often that we hear Jesus calling people by name in scripture. Jesus told him to come down from the tree. And then, Jesus invited himself into Zacchaeus' house – to stay in his house.

Zacchaeus could hardly believe it. Jesus invited himself to his house. His house – the house of a tax collector, one who was despised by those in that crowd; a tax collector and a thief in the minds of the people who were there that day. But, as I read to you from the CEB this morning, when Zacchaeus comes down from the tree the CEB translation reads, "Look Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay then four times as much."

Zacchaeus already gives half of his possessions to the poor. It doesn't say that he that he will give half of his possessions. The typical restitution that is required to someone who has been cheated would be two times. Zacchaeus already gives four times the amount if he has cheated someone. So Zacchaeus already goes above and beyond what his faith requires. And when Zacchaeus approaches Jesus, he stands before him. He does not drop to his knees to ask forgiveness for his behaviors.

So maybe there is a message here about the crowds, that they had misjudged Zacchaeus. Had they labeled him a thief when he was not a dishonest man? Had they judged him too harshly?

We don't know for sure if Zacchaeus had cheated people or not. We do know that Jesus noticed him, treated him like a person regardless of what the people thought of him. And we know that Jesus himself has often had difficult things to say to or about rich people. But Jesus called Zacchaeus a son of Abraham – a Jew. Jesus confirmed Zacchaeus' place in his Jewish community.

What an amazing thing for Zacchaeus! All that led up to his meeting Jesus was worth it. If you think about it, Zacchaeus had overcome obstacles to see Jesus. They may not be major life events, but they were obstacles none the less. Simple, every day difficulties could have kept Zacchaeus from Jesus.

I wonder what obstacles we face that could keep us from seeing Jesus. Perhaps it's that extra few minutes or extra half hour of sleep in the morning that keeps us from morning time in prayer. Or maybe it's the thousand and one activities throughout the day that are obstacles to taking time for Jesus.

Maybe it's worries over the job, the kids, or even the state of the country or the world or the planet, those thoughts that fill our brain when we sit down to pray. And we give up because it's too hard to get all this stuff out of our head.

Or maybe it's a failure to recognize Jesus. Maybe we don't see Jesus in the person who has just cut us off in the parking lot; or the person who is struggling with addiction to alcohol or drugs; or the person who is pushing a shopping cart with all her life's possessions; or the immigrant who is seeking safety, or the person with whom we disagree politically. Or maybe we don't want to climb that tree to see Jesus because we are struggling in our faith and we're just not sure what we believe anymore.

Obstacles come in all different shapes and sizes. But when we try to overcome our obstacles, to catch a glimpse of Jesus, he is there. Jesus is there calling us by name. He already knows us, for who we are. And Jesus is inviting himself into our homes, into our hearts, and into our souls. Jesus, the Human One, came for us.

So, as we enjoy the changing colors of the leaves on the trees this week, as we look at all those trees, may we recall Zacchaeus' story. May we then think about what we can do to better see Jesus in our midst and may we recall that Jesus has already invited himself into our homes, our hearts, and our souls. And as we do, may our relationship with Jesus be transformed. May our lives be transformed. And may we, like Zacchaeus experience great joy.

