

Zaccheus – and the Joy of Coming Down

Sermon by Stephen Godsall-Myers

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‘Zaccheus was a wee, little man, a wee, little man was he.

‘He climbed up in a sycamore tree

‘for the Lord he wanted to see,

‘for the Lord he wanted to see.’”

For many children, this Sunday School song, is their first introduction to Zaccheus, the tax collector, who appears in chapter 19 of Luke’s Gospel.

I am not sure what lesson or lessons most children take away from the story, but if nothing else, they, and we, will always remember

that Zaccheus was small in stature – “a wee little man”!

Now if that is all we take away from this story, it would be a shame!

For Zaccheus’ physical size is, at most, a sub-plot, a minor theme in this wonderful drama from Luke’s Gospel.

The story of Zaccheus is not just a story

for the second day of a Vacation Bible School curriculum.

This account of Jesus’ encounter with Zaccheus, nicely connects with so many themes and events from Luke’s Gospel.

Before I go on, you might be asking: “Why am I preaching about Zaccheus anyway? Why not read this lesson for Reformation Day in the Castle Church?”

The short answer is, this text was ‘chosen’ for me

– it was the German preaching text for yesterday,
the third Sunday after Trinity.

But, truth be told, I did choose the text:

-- in the German lectionary system, there are both an assigned Gospel text and an assigned preaching text. I chose the preaching text, and not the appointed Gospel, which, by the way, was the story of the Prodigal Son. I figured you have heard plenty of sermons on that text!

So, back to Zaccheus, the wee little man, with the so big encounter with Jesus!
As the drama unfolds,

we know a few things about Zaccheus, besides his small stature

– he is a **tax collector**. In Jesus’ time, this is another way of saying that he is unpopular – disliked, hated. In the world in which he lived,
this was one strike against him.

We also are told that Zaccheus is **rich**.

If you have following along in Luke’s Gospel, you know that being rich is another major strike against you.

At the beginning of Luke’s Gospel, we heard Mary sing the Magnificat,
And she sang of how God puts down the mighty
and how the rich he sends empty away.

One of the woes that Jesus pronounces in the Sermon on the Plain,
is “woe to you rich, for you have received your consolation.” ‘
And in the chapter right before today’s lesson,

we met the rich young man, who went away from Jesus very sad, because Jesus had told him to sell all his possessions and follow him.

So, you see, Zaccheus, as a rich, tax collector –two strikes against him. Now Jesus is coming and he seems to have a third strike against him –that pesky height problem. How will he ever see Jesus?

Zaccheus will not strike out this time –he will climb –way up –in a sycamore tree, *for the Lord he wanted to see.*

Do you like mysteries? Here is a mystery –a deep mystery – Why? Why in heaven 's name? Why in Jesus ' name, did Zaacheus , the rich tax collector, want to see Jesus.

As was pointed out in the sermon here yesterday, Luther translates Zaccheus wish to see Jesus with the German word, “*begehrte*”

-- which means: ‘desire, hunger for’. Zaccheus has a desire, a hunger ...

Luther will use this word 2 other times in his translation of Luke 's Gospel: First, in the story of the Prodigal Son (I could not ignore this great parable completely!). When the son is off in the far country, down on his luck, feeding the pigs, we are told that he *begehrte*, he hungered for the pods that the pigs were eating.

The second time the word is used is in the account of the rich man and Lazarus, Lazarus, the poor man who lies outside the gates while the rich man feasts, he *begehrte*, he hungers for the scraps that fall from the rich man 's table.

So, also Zaccheus, *begehrte* == Zaccheus hungers.

He is rich, but has a deep hunger.

He is rich, but he has not received the consolation that his hearts seeks.

He is seeking, he wants to see ...

Like the blind man in the verses just preceding the story of Zaccheus, he wants to see.: *for the Lord he wanted to see*

Zaccheus has a hunger to see Jesus.

Who knows what he has heard about Jesus?

who knows what Zaccheus expects?

but he has a hunger for consolation, and he wants to see Jesus.

And just so it was, many years before, right after Jesus ' birth, it was the old prophet Simeon, who was looking forward to the consolation of Israel, who sees Jesus and knows that in this child Jesus, he has seen the salvation promised by God.

Yes, Zaccheus, *begehrte*, he hungered to see Jesus –it was a deep hunger.

And, then something happened, something perhaps that Zaccheus had imagined, maybe not, but something wonderful happened:

Not only did Zaccheus see Jesus –Jesus saw Zaccheus!

Jesus sees Zaccheus, and speaks to Zaccheus

– “come down, come down, I must stay at your home.”

And, Luke tells us –Zaccheus received him joyfully!

Yes, there was great joy, there is great joy, when grace comes into one's life, when new life is found. This is the joy the waiting Father spoke of in his conversation with the older son in the Parable of the Prodigal Son – the joy of having one lost be found, of one dead becoming alive!

So, here again in Luke's Gospel, the words sung by Mary in chapter 1, are coming true ... "he has filled the hungry with good things."

The hungry Prodigal son, was filled with good things -- food and a father's blessing,

The poor, hungry Lazarus, was filled with good things at the bosom of Abraham.

And now Zaccheus, is filled with good things – he has his deep hunger met with Jesus' gracious words and presence.

Jesus will stay with Zaccheus, just as he stayed with two travelers on the Emmaus road, who had bid Jesus: "Stay with us, for it is evening" They made this offer to Jesus not realizing that their deep sorrow would be turned to joy by this One who stayed with them.

Yes, when Jesus stays with us, when Jesus comes to us, intimately close to us,

Like at the table of the two Emmaus disciples,

Like at the table of Zaccheus,

Like at this table of Holy Communion

– it is a moment of grace, satisfying grace!

Jesus comes to meet our deepest hunger, our deepest Begehren

Jesus comes to bring us consolation – forgiveness, reconciliation and grace

Jesus comes with heavenly food and heavenly promise

And there is cause for great joy

– just as Luke tells us the angels sang at his birth!

But ...

There always seems to be a but, a "wait a minute"

The Zaccheus story is no exception.

Zaccheus is filled with joy, but ..

But -- There were some who grumbled.

But -- There were some who did not get it.

There have always been those who grumble, those who do not get it

– who do not get this grace of God, so freely, so prodigally given.

The Older Son didn't get it – the Father had to take him out to the shed and "splain a few things"

The rich man who had ignored Lazarus, now that he got it, suddenly had a concern about his brothers, he knew that they didn't get it.

Yes, there is grumbling, there are those who do not get it

– this seems to come with the human territory

Jesus did provoke his share of grumblers along the way,

You know he did eat with sinners,

he did hang out with the wrong crowd..

We know that even Jesus' own disciples were sometimes

found in the group that did not get it.
But, here is the midst of human grumblings and misunderstandings,
we find Zaccheus, former tax collector, former rich man,
who gets it –he got it.
When Jesus came into his life, he was ready to get it.
He understood what his life had been telling him
–that he had not got it, that he had not found it
–not in his wealth, not in his important job.
There was an emptiness in his life and he saw it and was ready to admit it.
As if, he had heard the question from Isaiah, last week 's preaching text:
*“Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread? Your labor for
that which does not satisfy?”*
Zaccheus with his hunger, with his desire, was ready to be found by Jesus –
Jesus sees him and comes to his house to stay.
And as Jesus proclaims, salvation has come to this house.
Salvation, the Savior of the world, has come to Zaccheus 'house,
The Savior stayed at Zaccheus 'house and announced salvation,
but this Jesus, this Savior is not done:
We know that Jesus is on his way,
–Luke has reported that Jesus had long ago set his face toward Jerusalem.
Jesus is on his way, to climb up a tree –the tree is the Cross,
he climbs it for all of us.
And Jesus will not come down from that tree
-- because he came to bring salvation to all,
to all those in life 's way
who find themselves with one or two or more strikes against them
who find themselves grumbling,
who face obstacles, of their own making, the making of others,
all those who have deep hungers that the world cannot satisfy,
Jesus came to stay, to stay through the darkness of Good Friday,
To stay within the confines of the dark tomb,
So that he could be raised from death and darkness, and come to stay with us as
the Resurrected Lord, the Risen Savior.
Jesus has come our way, we know we have a Savior,
We need not climb up to see him or be seen by him.
We have a Savior who not only came down from heaven to see us,
but climbed up the Cross where he could both see us and save us.
The Savior we saw above the door when we came into this church today.
Jesus comes to us today –Let us receive him joyfully!

Amen