“People Who Made A Difference; Zacchaeus”
Luke 19:1-10

We are in the third part of a series on People Who Made A Difference. Today we come to Zacchaeus. If you grew up in the church you remember the song; (sing…)

Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
and a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
for the Lord he wanted to see…

But it would be a mistake to leave Zacchaeus in our childhood.

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From the Gospel of Luke;

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. 2 A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. 3 He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. 4 So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. 5 When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” 6 So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.

7 All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” 8 Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” 9 Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. 10 For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

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It’s the third year of Jesus’ ministry. He’s on his way to Jerusalem for the Passover celebration. In a matter of days, he’ll be crucified. They are in Jericho, 15
miles southeast of Jerusalem. There is an intensity to it all. That’s where Jesus meets Zacchaeus.

Who is this guy and why does Luke want us to know about him? Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector. That means he was in charge of other tax collectors and made a cut of their profits. Tax collectors were Jews who extracted money from their own people to fuel the oppressive Roman Empire. They got rich doing it. Who wouldn’t hate them?

He hears Jesus is passing through and wants to see him. Luke says he was “short in stature,” so he climbs a tree to see Jesus. So, you’ve got an unpopular, rich guy up a tree! Why is that? Why does a rich guy care about Jesus? What does he want?

Maybe he was dissatisfied with his life in some way. Maybe he wanted something more. He could have been sick of cheating people, sick of living a lie. Maybe he was dead and empty inside. Whatever it was, he climbed a tree to see Jesus.

Augustine wrote, “Our hearts are restless, until they find their rest in Thee.” Is there a desire and longing within every person to know God? The atheist would say not. The secularist, the humanist, the agnostic would all argue the point. Even so, we’ve got a rich guy up a tree who wants to see Jesus. You’ve got to wonder why.

The grace of it is that Jesus calls him down. Zacchaeus is seen, he is noticed, he is valued. I can’t think of one account where a person sought Christ and didn’t find him. Lepers, prostitutes, adulterers, tax collectors, drunkards...he found them all. He loved them all and gave them a new life.

Those observing grumbled, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” (19:7b) That’s the problem most people have with Jesus, he hangs out with the wrong people. That’s the nature of grace. It stands with the wrong people for all the right reasons. In a sense, grace is scandalous.

Here’s what Zacchaeus said to Jesus;

‘Look, half of my possessions, O Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.’ (19:8).

That’s virtually impossible. If you gave half away and repaid four-fold you would end up with nothing, or even have to borrow money. So, is that a formula? Does everybody who comes to Jesus have to give half of all they own to the poor and pay back anyone they have defrauded four-fold? Jesus didn’t ask that of everyone. He asked the young rich ruler for 100%! He never asked anyone for a tithe, or 10% of their earnings. He didn’t even ask Zacchaeus for this.
This was something Zacchaeus wanted to do. Christ saw something in him no one else saw. This isn’t a requirement, it’s a response! You can’t experience God’s grace and it not change your life. It’s not because you have to change. You want to change. It’s not a formula, or a percentage. It’s all of it! How could it be calculated?

Zacchaeus wants to get away from his old life. He wants to be generous, as God has been generous to him in Christ. He wants to make restitution for all the pain and injustice he has caused. He’s got to get rid of that old life if he is going to take on a new one. You’ve got to let go of something if you are going to take on something else.

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In the end Jesus responds; “Today salvation has come to this house.” Why? Because of the money? Because of the amount? Because of some formula? No, because of a transformed human heart. Somebody just left an old life for a new one!

The awareness and the experience of grace precedes repentance and change. Out of all that comes a life of stewardship, a life that belongs to God. All of it.

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The tragedy is that some people never climb a tree to look beyond their own lives and they die down there on the ground, impoverished or rich, broken and lost. They don’t look for anything else. You hope grace comes for them in other ways.

There are others who climb that tree but stay in it their entire lives in some constant search, never willing to relinquish their wills or their hearts to God. They sleep in that tree. They eat in that tree. They read books, debate, and argue in those trees. And, they stay lost in a tree. Always searching – never willing to be found. They never come down.

But there are those who accept the invitation and something happens to them. Their lives change; their priorities shift. Their goals, aspirations, and dreams, all change. Not because they’re good people, but because God loved them when they weren’t. The rest of their story is stewardship; a life that belongs to God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Congregation: Amen.