

Three Chopt Presbyterian Church
Dr. Brenda Halbrooks, preaching
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On Being Blessed

Luke 19:1-10

1 He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When 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." ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸Zacchaeus 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." ⁹Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Yesterday afternoon my parents called to wish me well in my installation this afternoon. They are not able to be here, as they are not able to travel and they live in Alabama now. I do have friends coming in, some who are here already and who are going to be at the 11:00 service. I am reminded of the woman who came to church as a visitor one Sunday. She arrived a little bit late and was greeted by an usher who handed her a bulletin. She looked in to the church and was looking for a seat at the very front. She asked the usher: "Is there a seat up there? I'd like to sit right at the very front." The usher said to her: "Ma'am, you don't want to sit right up front. The preacher is boring." The lady said: "Do you know who I am?" He said: "no." "I'm the preacher's mother." He said: "Do you know who I am?" "Good."

Now, some of my friends are very familiar with Richmond and have a lot of connections here. But some of them are not familiar with the lore and the jargon of the Richmond area and so they have been asking me: "What is this Three Chopt Presbyterian Church? What is Three Chopt? What does that mean? How do you spell that?" This has led to some imaginative speculation in regard to why the church is called Three Chopt

Presbyterian Church. There is conjecture that it was actually Tree Shop and the founders had a lisp! I have informed my friends that Three Chopt refers to the location of the church on a historic road that runs through Richmond on an old Indian trail that was once marked by three notches on a tree. Our name is part of the lore of our church family and part of the lore of the area, this church named for the three notches on a tree of an old Indian trail.

Nestled in the branches of the church family genealogy is a man named Zacchaeus. In the New Testament lesson Zacchaeus is up a tree and out on a limb and headed for a fall when he meets Jesus, who sees him and calls him by name and tells him: "Hurry down from the tree! I must stay at your house today."

Luke wants us to like Zacchaeus. Luke endears him to us. How does he pull this off? What does he do to get us to like Zacchaeus from the very beginning? Zacchaeus is said to be the chief tax collector in the wealthy city of Jericho, so he is clearly a powerful man. It is also stated that he is rich. The rich and the powerful in Luke's gospel do not fare so very well. In the first few chapters of the gospel of Luke, Jesus' mother Mary sings. In her song "the poor and the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be sent empty away." In the Sermon on the Mount in the gospel of Luke Jesus says "blessed are the poor." Whereas Zacchaeus is mentioned in chapter 19th, in the 18th chapter of Luke just prior, Jesus encounters the rich young ruler and says to him: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." The rich and the powerful do not fare too well in Luke's gospel.

Yet Luke manages to endear us to Zacchaeus. How does he pull this over on us? He mentions him by name, he says that he is short and he describes him scrambling up a tree. Well, we've all been short. Some of us are still short. We've all had the experience of straining to see when those around us who are taller can view better than we can. We've all had experiences, even if it was as a child, of straining to reach something high just beyond our grasp on the very top shelf. We've all had the experience of looking up to someone who is talking down to us. Some of us are not that terribly short but our children have outgrown us. It is disconcerting to try to fuss at someone who is taller than you are! Luke endears us to Zacchaeus by describing him as being short.

He scrambles up a tree. It is hard to keep a dignified persona when you are climbing a tree. Zacchaeus is climbing a tree to look for Jesus and now he is head and shoulders above every one else. In one sense this is a comfortable position for Zacchaeus because he is above others. In truth he probably does have more money than most of the people who are, now, beneath him. He is looking for Jesus. We might wonder what is it that causes him to seek Jesus? Has he heard something about this man? Perhaps he has heard of the way in which Jesus is particularly gathering those who are outcast and, although Zacchaeus is wealthy and powerful, in a way he is a lonely outcast himself. Perhaps he has heard that Jesus has one of his disciples who is a tax collector, Levi, also known as Matthew. Zacchaeus is looking for Jesus.

Jesus comes by, calls him by name, and tells him: “Hurry down out of the tree! I must stay at your house today!” Zacchaeus is happy to welcome him. The crowd around Zacchaeus, however, begins to grumble and complain. This has happened before in the gospel of Luke. Three times prior the crowd has grumbled and complained in a moment when Jesus has associated with someone who is on the margins of society. Jesus is at it again. Jesus and the tax collector, Jesus and the lepers, Jesus and the prostitute, Jesus and the children, Jesus and the widow, here he is again. He is going to go home with someone who is a sinner, the crowd grumbles. Off they go, the crook and the Christ, headed for a table.

Somewhere on the way or at the table something happens to Zacchaeus. This man is transformed. Unprompted, not coerced and not admonished in any way by Jesus, he announces that he is going to give half of his wealth to the poor. Furthermore, he announces that if he has defrauded anyone he will repay. He will, in fact, make reparations four times the amount that he owes. Zacchaeus is transformed.

What are we to make of this story, this account of Zacchaeus and Jesus and the crowd? In a community where a homeless man not taking his medication succumbs to his violent impulses and murders a woman off Broad street? What are we to make of this story in a world where half a dozen college students are killed in an accidental fire at a beach house? What are we to make of this story in a world where we are overwhelmed with the tragedy of natural disaster all over the globe and find ourselves numb to the daily reports from the war in Iraq? This is a world that needs our generosity. This is a world of people in pain and people in need.

God, however, is not after our generosity. God is after our heart. Jesus is looking to call us by name, invite us to the table, and to see in us what we may not have been able to see in ourselves. By calling Zacchaeus down from the tree and declaring that he is going to stay at Zacaheus’ house, Jesus sees a hospitable and gracious man and Zacchaeus becomes that man. Jesus sees through what the crowd sees in Zaccheus to who he really is.

God is after our heart.

I’d like to tell you a story of hospitality and generosity that is part of the lore of my family. About 15 years ago I served a church in Atlanta which had a homeless shelter on site. (This is a story on Anna who is in Germany as an exchange student and is not here to defend herself!). Anna was three years old. After church one Sunday we were leaving and a man named Charles was sitting on a bench outside the sanctuary. Anna, the eternal extrovert, walked up to Charles and said: “Are you waiting to go home?” Charles said: “Actually, the church is my home. I live here in the shelter of the church”. Anna said: “Why don’t you come home with us? You can sleep in my bed and play with my toys!” About a year later, I was very pregnant with Amy. It so happened that the grocery stores offered a lottery in Georgia at that time, before the days of the state lottery. Charles liked to play the lottery at the grocery store across the street from the church. The day came when he won. \$10,000, which is a lot of money for any of us and was certainly a

lot of money for a man who did not have a penny to his name. Charles asked me to go with him to receive the big check because of course it became a story featured on the 6 o'clock news: "Homeless man wins \$10,000." When the cameras are rolling and he is handed the big check he announces that he is going to give all the money to the church which has sheltered him.

Hospitality and generosity.

God is after our heart. The very last verse of this account of Jesus and Zacchaeus says that the Son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost. Jesus is seeking us, desiring to call us by name and to invite us to the table. Today we come to that table in Holy Communion. Zacchaeus climbed down from a tree and goes to the table of our Lord. Little does he know that Jesus will be lifted up on a tree and nailed to a cross to redeem him. Little does he know that we will come to the table to remember that sacrifice on our behalf and the eternal and abundant life that Jesus gives to us.

Friends as we remember the lore of the church named for the tree with three notches, let us remember the Savior who comes to us and redeems us and seeks us. Amen.