

## **Jesus Seeks Us**

Our New Testament Scripture is Luke 19:1-10. In one of his final encounters before his triumphal Passion Week entry into the city, Jesus meets a man named Zacchaeus in the city of Jericho, about 20 kilometers east of Jerusalem. Jesus' statement to Zacchaeus "could well be considered the 'key verse' of Luke" (W L Liefeld) and is a summary of his mission throughout his time on earth.

I'll read **Luke 19:1-10:**

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

In our text for today, Jesus has journeyed closer to Jerusalem, where he was to soon be arrested, tried and crucified. In his encounter with Zacchaeus, Jesus demonstrated this central theme of his rescue mission. And in our text he gives one of his best-loved statements about why he came to earth: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost" (10). In other words, he came to seek you and me.

Some of us here today remember singing as children the Sunday School song, "Zacchaeus." We sang about how...

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man  
And a wee little man was he.  
He climbed up in the Sycamore tree,  
For the Lord he wanted to see.*

Perhaps you remember when you were a child and the experience of going to a parade and not being able to see over the crowds of big people as the floats and marching bands passed by. So, we can be sympathetic with this little man named Zacchaeus, who was so eager to see Jesus he forgot his professional dignity and climbed up in a tree in order to see "who Jesus was" (3). He wanted to see Jesus, but as our text shows, Jesus wanted to see Zacchaeus and had a purpose for this encounter and for Zacchaeus' life.

As we consider the setting and situation of Zacchaeus, we realize what an unlikely convert he was. The city of Jericho was on a main trade route and was an important customs center. And being the chief tax collector in this prosperous commercial city, Zacchaeus had a lucrative and influential position. He had contracted with the occupying Roman government to collect taxes from his fellow Jews. As long as he gave to the Romans the amount they required from the people, Zacchaeus could demand from the people whatever he wanted for himself. And he was an entrepreneur. He had employed other tax collectors to work under his supervision to do most of the busy work, while he amassed most of the ill-gained wealth for himself.

His singular pursuit of the material at the expense of relationships had likely made him a hardened and hated man. He had no time for worship in the synagogue, if in fact he would have been allowed entrance. And certainly he would have to be regarded as the most unlikely man in town to be converted to any kind of religious faith. He was a man in need of the impossible.

Understandably so, his neighbors despised Zacchaeus for his collusion with the Romans that padded his coffers at their expense. He may have been small in stature, but his was big into greed and extortion. I can imagine that every time he went out into a crowd he felt a bit at risk. Not only would he hear jeers from the crowd, but he also might have been subjected to physical attack. In a very literal way he was hindered by the crowd, which was not about to give him a “front-row” seat in order to see Jesus. He was curious about Jesus. But more importantly, Jesus sought him.

Even in the large crowd of people, Jesus was aware of Zacchaeus. In fact, Jesus indicated a divine awareness of him and expressed a divinely ordained mandate to seek and to save Zacchaeus. When Jesus saw him he said, “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I *must* stay at your house today” (5). Seeking Zacchaeus was a part of Jesus’ rescue mission.

Jesus, the eternal Son of God, came to bring salvation to a lost, condemned world. And in his mission on earth Jesus reflected and expressed the love of God for a lost world and his desire to save, to rescue rather than to condemn the world (Jn. 3:16f). Anyone who comes to faith in Jesus Christ has to admit that God did the choosing as well as the rescuing (Jn. 15:16; Eph. 1:4). I believe that the initial interest expressed by Zacchaeus was part of the gift of God to draw him to Christ Jesus. His primary motivation in climbing that tree might have been simple curiosity, but whatever the motivation, it was the nudging of God. As the great theologian of the Reformation, John Calvin notes, no one seeks after God on his or her own. The Spirit of God was active in the mind and heart of Zacchaeus to draw him to this encounter with Jesus. As Jesus says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).

Jesus already knew Zacchaeus' name when he saw him in the tree. And the truth is, even though Jesus knows all about us, he still wants to meet us and connect with us. More than loving him, Jesus actually *liked* Zacchaeus and wanted to "hang out" with him. And that's what Scripture means when it speaks of God's delighting in us. Imagine!

It was considered at least undignified, perhaps even shameful, for a grown man to climb a tree, at least in full view of everyone. And when any man, woman, girl or boy comes to faith in Jesus there is no room for pride and we must come to the cross of Jesus' shameful death for our shameful guilt. And when we do, we see the glory of God's salvation. The way to knowing God is through faith in Jesus. And we must come in simple faith to the shameful cross, where we are confronted with our sinfulness and guilt. There we acknowledge that the Son of God had to receive our punishment for our shameful sin and guilt and become sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21).

Jesus came to seek the lost. And in the remaining verses of our text we see that Jesus came also to save the lost. In these verses we note how Zacchaeus became "Exhibit A" for the work that Jesus had come to do—to transform and save for the kingdom the lost that he had sought. Again in Luke's gospel we see him using the "how much more" argument. If someone like Zacchaeus can be rescued, how much more can the rest of us be transformed by the grace of God.

When Jesus called to him, Zacchaeus received Jesus as his self-invited guest. And this is the way Jesus comes, not as a beggar but as the guest of honor. We read in Revelation that the risen Christ always comes to us in that way:

"Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and he with me" (Rev. 3:20, NIV).

This is what saving faith is all about—receiving Jesus into our lives as the crucified and risen Lord and Savior. He comes to share with us, not only as our guest of honor, but as the host of our house and our lives, as Lord and Master. Zacchaeus is overwhelmed with gratitude and wonder that Jesus would choose to stay at his house. No true conversion is without this sense of unworthiness and wonder over God's mercy, forgiveness, grace and undeserved love.

Once again, in a theme that runs throughout the four gospels, Jesus is the host in table fellowship and he makes himself known through the breaking of bread (Lk. 24:31). This includes not only how the presence of Jesus is experienced in Communion, but also the way that Jesus continues to use the meal setting and the practice of hospitality to communicate his presence and grace and to create an atmosphere of acceptance and ease of communication and sharing. It was essential for Jesus to go to Zacchaeus' house to establish an eternal saving relationship with him. Jesus forms a relationship that involves all of our life.

In contrast to the self-righteous attitude of the crowd, the spirit of Jesus was to reach out to and get into the hearts of those who are aware of their need and sinfulness and to heal them by his love, grace, mercy and forgiveness. The attitude of Jesus is that of one on a grand rescue ministry and a focus on those who know they are lost and are in need of his divine help.

In our church in Brussels, Belgium, we faced a unique opportunity to practice God's mercy by lovingly receiving a man and his family who had undergone an amazing transformation by God's saving grace. This man and his family were nominated by the elders to serve as the property manager for our church, which meant that he and his family would live on our church property. We hosted a family that had invited Jesus to be their host! We received a man to serve with us who had served a prison sentence for involuntary manslaughter, and who was waiting to pay his legal debt to society and, more importantly, had been transformed by the power of God into a new person. This was God's test to us to be certain we are not, like the elder brother of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:25ff), on the outside of God's mercy and grace and siding with this critical, accusatory crowd.

By simply hosting Jesus, Zacchaeus' life was changed. He stood up boldly and announced how his changed heart would express itself in actual deeds. Zacchaeus declared his commitment to give half of his possessions to the poor and fourfold the amount to those he had cheated. This generosity far exceeded the requirements of the Jewish law.

This demonstrated that works give evidence of grace. Zacchaeus positioned himself under the Lordship of Jesus because his heart had been set free from the bondage of selfishness and greed. His wallet had been converted as well as his heart. Converted Zacchaeus became a living testimony of the power of Jesus to rescue a life. God's grace does not dwell in our strengths but rather in our weakness, where Christ's power "tabernacles." All Jesus asks is that we give to him our brokenness and neediness and allow him to work and live within us. As with Zacchaeus, all we can offer Jesus is our obedience and brokenness and let him use us and our resources as he will. He will show his power especially through our weakness as he shapes us into his likeness.

And we, like Zacchaeus, receive words of assurance from Jesus, who announced, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham" (9). Unlike the critics, who prided themselves as the true sons of Abraham by virtue of their religious pedigree or prideful attainments, Jesus said transformed Zacchaeus was a true son of Abraham. As Paul notes, all of us who have faith in Jesus are the sons and daughters of Abraham (Rom. 4, Gal. 3). We too have the promise of God that we belong to him and are his children forever. Our rescue is not based on what we can do for God, but is by his grace alone (Eph. 2:8-9).

Jesus came to seek and to save us in his divine rescue mission. You may be one of those Jesus is seeking. At this point you're hidden away in the crowd, but your interest in meeting Jesus will draw his attention to you, even if you're "up a tree." Jesus is interested in you as though you were the only person in the world. His attention is as focused on you as it was upon Zacchaeus.

We've no more claim upon salvation than had Zacchaeus. We need to realize and remember that it took as much grace to forgive and save us, even if our first turning to Christ was during childhood, as it took to save Zacchaeus. Conversion is divine work. As we accept the rescue and inclusion of Zacchaeus and other "notorious sinners," let's focus on our ongoing need to keep coming back to the cross for Jesus to crucify our proud, sinful self and let his grace and power rule in us. Let's offer him, not our strength but rather our weakness and our total dependence on him. After all, Jesus came to seek and to save us too.

Brennan Manning, Korean War Marine, who became a Catholic priest, serving among the poor, fought a battle with alcoholism. No one understood God's grace any more profoundly than Brennan, whose books have spoken to me deeply about God's unconditional, seeking love. In *The Ragamuffin Gospel* he reflects on Jesus' mission of seeking the lost:

"Jesus comes for sinners, for those as outcast as tax collectors and for those caught up in squalid choices and bad dreams. He comes for corporate executives, street people, superstars, farmers, hookers, addicts, IRS agents, AIDS victims, and even used car salesmen. Jesus not only talks with these people but dines with them—fully aware that his table fellowship with sinners will raise the eyebrows of religious bureaucrats who hold up the robes and insignia of their authority to justify their condemnation of the truth and their rejection of the gospel of grace," which "seems too good to be true" (22).

Jesus loves us and even *enjoys* us. You invite to lunch those you want to spend time with. To hang out with. Jesus seeks you and me.