

When You Are Up And Out
Luke 19:1-10

February 15, 2004
Dr. J. Howard Olds

It's been said of Jesus that whenever he met a person, it was as if that person were an island around which Jesus sailed, until he found where the real problem was and there he landed.

He did that with the woman at the well and landed on the question of marriage. "Go call your husband," Jesus said to her.

He did that with the rich young ruler and landed on the question of money. "Go sell all of your possessions and give them to the poor," He said to that man.

He did that with Zacchaeus and landed on the question of salvation. "Today salvation has come to your house."

*Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
a wee little man was he,
He climbed up in the sycamore tree
for the Lord he wanted to see.
And as the Savior passed that way,
he looked up in the tree,
And he said, "Zacchaeus, you come down,
For I'm going to your house today.
For I'm going to your house today."*

A LITTLE MAN UP A TREE

Whatever our childhood memories of Zacchaeus, I encourage you to let him grow up today. He may have been short in stature, but he was distinguished in business. In my mind's eye, he was a man in his forties with a little gray hair around the temples or a balding spot on the top. I am amazed at how we judge people by what happens to their hair.

Zacchaeus lived in Jericho, a resort town about twenty-three miles from Jerusalem, known for its palm trees and balsam groves which perfumed the air for miles. It had rich gardens watered by living springs. Herod's winter home was there and it was a great thoroughfare for travelers, a great place to live and do business sort of like Brentwood, Tennessee.

Roman officials contracted with local entrepreneurs to collect the taxes, tolls, tariffs, and certain fees of a given area. The amount collected yielded a profit which the local person pocketed. Nobody likes tax collectors, even today. In Jesus' day, they were assumed to be dishonest and hated for their complicity with the Gentile oppressors. The Talmud advised "If you see a tax collector falling in a pit, don't help him out. Let him die; we will be better off without him."

Zacchaeus was a tax collector. He was rich; he was well fed, stylishly clothed, handsomely housed, and outwardly successful. Money may not be everything, but it

gives us certain liberties, allows us distinguished lifestyles, brings with it opportunities that poverty cannot afford. Given the choice between having and having not, I would choose to have. Life is a lot simpler that way. Zacchaeus was a businessman, doing well in his community. He had a great place to live and probably a wonderful family. That is the story of the person who looms in this Biblical passage that we have for us today.

On this particular occasion, he is a little man who is up a tree. He runs in front of the crowd so that he can climb a tree and see Jesus who is passing by. No grown, dignified business leader of any community would be seen climbing a tree in this particular fashion. I suggest to you that the tree is symbolic of his situation, the kinds of struggles of his life. He is a little man who is up a tree.

I am not exactly sure why he is there; maybe he is not sure himself. Maybe the demands of the day are just too much. There's an old saying which goes "a brimming cup of coffee requires a steady hand." "The fuller your plate, the greater your stress." "When business is good, the demands are tremendous." Pretty soon you don't just have yourself to care for; you have a whole staff and other people to worry about. You have a family to take care of. When you burn the candle at both ends you are likely to run out of candle. Maybe it was just tough making a living in Jericho at this particular time in history. I don't know. He was a little man who was up a tree and the tree is symbolic of something of the struggles of his life, something of the confusion of his day.

I suggested that perhaps he was a man in his mid-forties; I don't know for sure. I know that somewhere along in that period of time there is an intense personal evaluation that is frightening and disturbing, thoughts that surge through your mind. I remember it quite clearly. We start questioning who are we, why are we here and why everything matters so much. That is a period of self-doubt and disenchantment with everything familiar and stable. You know what I am talking about. You have either been there, are there, or will be there one of these days. Mid-life crises are for real. A little man who is up a tree.

Maybe he is feeling what Chuck Swindol calls the "lonely whine of the top dog." It's lonely at the top; people are jealous of you. You are not sure whom you can trust and the buck stops on your desk. You got what you want, but you are not sure you want what you got. Maybe he is feeling the lonely whine of a top dog. He is looking for something more. He is longing for something different and he is anxious to meet somebody who can make a difference in his life, so he runs ahead of the crowd and he climbs a tree.

Fred Craddock tells about an imaginary conversation with an old greyhound—those long-legged dogs who chase a mechanical rabbit around the track while people bet on them. When they retire they are adopted or destroyed. Fred says, "I was visiting in a home where a greyhound had been adopted and he and I were left in the living room together while the family went in the other room to finish dinner. I struck up a conversation with the old dog and I said, 'Do you miss the glitter and excitement of the track?' The old dog grunted, 'No.' 'What's the matter?' I asked. 'You get too old and stopped winning, get treated badly?' He raised up on his paws as if to say, 'I still got some race in me. I won over a million dollars for my owner. I was treated royally.' 'Then what happened?' He laid down and grunted, 'I quit.' 'Why did you quit?' I asked. 'I discovered that what I was chasing was not really a rabbit.' Then the dog raised up and stared me in the eye as if to say, 'All that running and running and running and what I was chasing was not even real.'" A little man up a tree—that is Zacchaeus, but it could be

you or maybe, it is me. It is a story that is as real as right now. A little man up a tree.

A LOVING CHRIST WITH EYES TO SEE

And as the Savior passed that way He looked up in the tree and He said, “*Zacchaeus, you come down, for I’m going to your house today.*”

When I was taught the childhood song that we sang to start the sermon, there were actions and motions that went with it. When you got to this part, you pointed your finger and you said at the top of your voice in an imperative, stern kind of way, “*Zacchaeus, you come down, for I’m going to your house today.*” I don’t think that is how it happened. There is no preaching here; there is no rebuking here. There is the loving Savior who looks up and sees a man out on a limb and dares to say to him, “Hey, Zach, I know what it’s like to be out on a limb. Let’s go over to your house and get a bite to eat and talk about it.” Zacchaeus came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

In the movie As Good As It Gets, Jack Nicholson plays a crude, obsessive-compulsive author by the name of Melvin Udall. He falls in love, however, with a waitress by the name of Carol Connelly played by Helen Hunt. Melvin finally invites Carol to dinner and then immediately insults her awfully about her dress. That’s when Carol says to Melvin, “Pay me a compliment, Melvin. I need one now.” Melvin then delivers one of the most romantic lines in big screen history. This deeply flawed man, his own worst enemy, looks at Carol with all the kindness his shriveled heart can muster and says, “Carol you make me want to be a better man.” That is what Jesus Christ does for us. He makes us want to be a better person. When he sits at our dinner table, shares in our lives, comes to know us in a personal way, we are inspired to be better than we think we sometimes are. You make me want to be a better man.

What makes Christianity Great?

Christianity is a great creed. Its beliefs stand the test of time. To *believe in God the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth*, revealed to us through His son Jesus Christ our Lord, and made present by the power of the Holy Spirit is powerful. To *believe in the communion of the saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting* is life shaping to say the least. Sometimes I pray “Lord I believe. Help thou my unbelief.” Christianity is a great creed. It is a great system of philosophy, a great belief system, but Christianity is more than a belief system.

Christianity is a Great Community. The best people on earth are in church. I can’t imagine my life without the friends I have made at church. My phone awakened me from sleep the other morning. Beulah Barlow was on the line. I used to sit at her table when I was her student pastor nearly forty years ago. She was just calling to check up on my health and wish me well. We had a conversation and caught up on her family and grandkids and great-grandkids. I remember the good times that we had spent together. The finest community that you could find in all the world is in the Church and what is lacking in the world is community. The Church has a wonderful privilege to create community where people belong to one another and know what it is to be cared for and needed, but Christianity is more than community.

Christianity is a Great Cause. I shutter to think of where the world might be without the enduring influence of the Church on society. It has saved us from weak resignation to the evils we deplore and challenged us in the face of injustice to do a whole lot more. The world is a better place because the Church has been present in the midst of it. It has

risen to call attention to the evils that are among us and challenges us to be better than we sometimes are. The Church is a great cause. Christianity is more than a great cause.

Christianity is a PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS CHRIST. There is never a burden that He will not carry. There's never a sorrow that He will not share. When you walk through the darkest valleys He will not desert you. When you climb the highest summit, He will steady you. In the routine of the day, He is your reason to continue keeping on. Christianity offers us a spiritual friendship with Jesus Christ that changes us forever. Have you heard Him call your name? Do you know Him as a friend? Are the doors of your heart open to His presence? Have you invited Him home for dinner? Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ?

A TRANSFORMED MAN FOR ETERNITY. A friendship with Jesus empowers an ethical miracle. This encounter of a divine kind reforms Zacchaeus. It empowers him to set new standards of honesty and put his life on a whole new footing.

There is another little Sunday school jingle that was up there alongside Zacchaeus in my Sunday school days. It went, "If you're saved and you know it, then your life will surely show it."

Zacchaeus has reached the showing stages of his life. He stands up in front of those who hate him the most and says, "There are two things that I am willing to do today to change my way of my life. First of all, I want to become **generous**. Half of all of my possessions, I give to the poor."

Nothing frees us from slavery to possessions like generosity. The poor didn't need to receive as much as Zacchaeus needed to give. Giving amounted to an emancipation proclamation. The one set free is Zacchaeus. He is now free to hear the cry to the needy. Oh, what a relief it is to become a generous person. Over the years I have watched those who would squeeze the silver out of a dime and those who are free to give to those in need. I have watched the differences of their lives. I have observed the way they lived and the joy in their hearts. Don't be fooled by this my friend, there is power here. "Today I become generous and half my goods, I will give to the poor."

"Today", says Zacchaeus, "I want to make **restitution**. "If I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." The Law of Moses required him to pay it back and add a fifth. Zacchaeus quadruples the pay back. The name Zacchaeus means pure, righteous. He is starting to live up to this name. We live by the name Christian. When are we going to become what we call ourselves?

We cast a vision a couple of years ago of Brentwood United Methodist Church as a place where *hearts are touched and lives are transformed*. We are trying to become what we perceive ourselves to be.

Transformation implies a new being, a new creative energy flowing from the center which acts with creative power in a person's life. Paul writes in II Corinthians 5:17 and 18, "*If anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation. The old has gone; the new has come. All this is from God who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation.*"

Extreme makeovers are a big business these days. There were about 6.6 million of them

in the United States in 2002, at an average cost of \$20,000. Better than a new look is a new you.

The transformation that I am talking about is from the inside out. I am talking about a change of disposition, heart, character. Join yourself to Christ and from that togetherness, there will come forth a new creation. That is the promise of the Gospel. That is what happens to a little man who is up a tree who dares to encounter Christ one day.

The place to start is with your date book and check book. Where we spend our time and how we spend our money tells us more about ourselves than we often want to know.

As my Daddy used to say, "Start living your life so the preacher won't have to lie at your funeral to say something good."

Today can be filled with joy for you because God is still at work bringing His kingdom of grace. Forgiveness can still be experienced. What outrageous good news. A camel cannot pass through the eye of a needle, but God can lead a rich man into the kingdom of Heaven. That makes all the difference. And Jesus said, "*Today salvation has come to this house.*" Could he say that of your house? He wants to say it about your house for the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.

Amen.

