

Sermon
The Reverend Dr. Phebe L. McPherson
All Saints' Sunday 2019

Luke 19:1-10

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

Zacchaeus refuses to be lost in the crowd. He refuses to hide. Zacchaeus probably should have been off in his bookkeeping office or reporting to some Roman high-up mucky-muck. Zacchaeus was the local tax collector. He bought into the system to survive and profit. Wasn't there some important meeting where Zacchaeus should have been?

In August of 1984 I heard that Archbishop Desmond Tutu was coming to town. Actually he was scheduled to be at Kirkridge Retreat and Conference Center in Pennsylvania to lead a small conference for 30 members of the clergy in September. The injustices and violence of apartheid in South Africa were in the news every day. *Was he really going to be right here?* American institutions—colleges and churches and businesses— were reexamining their investment portfolios in order to divest of financial interests in the South African separatist government. *Was he really going to be right here?* I was an associate at a downtown church in Baltimore. The Rector was away on vacation. If I said I wanted to go away for a week just when Sunday School was starting up and the program year was beginning, I knew what the answer would be. But there was *no way* I was not going to see the Anglican Archbishop of Capetown. And actually spend time with him! Some people follow rock stars. In my world where theology and religious practice meets social justice in real time, Archbishop Tutu is more important than any rock star you could ever name. There is no one more important, more impressive. He's a life-changer. So I prayed hard about it and figured out how to pull it off. I called the Rector while he was "Up North" and so this wouldn't *just be about me*, I said, "Wouldn't it be great to go on retreat together, you and me, with Desmond Tutu?" Pause. "Yes. Let's do it!" Mission accomplished.

I wonder what Zacchaeus had to do to get to that roadside to see and be with Jesus? Who did he have to convince in order to get the time off? Apparently, there was no-way he was going to miss the Jesus event in Jericho. It was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. A real life-changer. Who knew what would happen, but Zacchaeus was willing to do whatever it took. Imagine this rich guy,

throwing off his jacket and tie, climbing up an old gnarly fig tree, (*Who cares what anyone says!*) just to get a look.

I was two-months pregnant when I went to the Kirkridge retreat and spent much of the time during the conference in the bathroom throwing up—but with Leah Tutu’s kind motherly care. That was not what I anticipated. But in spite of my generative limitations, I heard and saw what I came to see—the person who formed and shaped a world-changing coalition, a community, who was able to help reshape the world—to move forward, a little bit closer to the kingdom of God—not a world of “we and they,” not a world made up of friends and enemies—but he spoke of UBUNTU—that we are *all in this together*—in a web of interconnectedness. This is what UBUNTU means. I was ready to sign up! With gratitude and excitement and anting to help make a difference, I offered to pay for whatever phone calls Bishop Tutu needed to make while he was at the conference. Those were the days of landlines and “long-distance.” Trinity Church, Wall Street (NYC), the wealthiest Episcopal Church in the world, gave him a blank check for whatever he needed, whenever he needed it.

When Jesus looked up and said to Zacchaeus, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today"—I totally understand why Zacchaeus said:

*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.*

What happened? Perhaps for the first time in his life Zacchaeus was given the opportunity to be part of something bigger than himself. Much, much bigger. Jesus was changing the world. Politically? Maybe. Socially? Maybe. Spiritually—at the deepest human level? Definitely. And, forever. Luke says Zacchaeus climbed the fig tree so he could see Jesus. But here’s what I wonder. I wonder, perhaps without knowing it, what Zacchaeus really wanted—was to be seen by Jesus? Zacchaeus wanted to be saved from his own small world. To be saved from insignificance. From not mattering. From wasting his life. Zacchaeus wanted to be saved from living invisibly—like a mummy, with only his wrappings to give him shape and form, but empty on the inside. As a tax-collector, perhaps he had dealt with others unfairly. We don’t really know that. But why not? He had no reason not to line his own pockets. To watch out for “Number

One” at the expense and the disadvantage of others. So what? What difference did it make. And he could afford a few luxuries. It’s a *dog eat dog world*. Every man for himself. Unless—there’s a higher calling. Something more. A reason to live a different way—a better way. To live and serve some bigger, better plan and purpose. Maybe the real question we call might ask is: Does God even care what we do with our lives?

Luke tells us that Jesus *looked up*. He looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." It may be the first time anyone ever *looked up* to Zacchaeus. —really saw him, cared about him. Zacchaeus matters. Hurry down? Jesus had a plan. I would have fallen out of the tree at that point! That’s the fastest way down! Jesus looked up to Zacchaeus with love and acceptance. He invited himself into Zacchaeus’ home, into his life—and into his future. Perhaps Jesus saw what Zacchaeus couldn’t see for himself. He saw one of his own. A son of Abraham. He called him, “My brother.”

In one of the discussions that took place at Kirkridge Retreat and Conference Center back in 1984, one of our colleagues asked after hearing about an incident when a bomb was thrown at the Tutu’s home—“Are you afraid? A slow smile came over Bishop Tutu’s face and he said quietly, “No. I’m not afraid. Because you, and you, and you—because you, my brothers and sisters here in American, are watching. As long as you are watching, my family and I will be safe.” It’s the first time I think I understood what the Body of Christ is, in real time. The Body of Christ is not just a metaphor or a theological construct—it is a living fellowship and connection, that genuinely matters—changes our lives and together, changes everything. We really are all in this together. In a web of interconnected life. Ubuntu.

What truly changes us? Does criticism? Or judgement? Or grades? Or punishment? Or threats? Perhaps nothing has more power to change us than being truly seen, recognized, accepted, and welcomed into a fellowship whose purpose is something bigger than ourselves—much, much bigger. Some purpose, belonging to God.

This is exactly what Jesus is doing in today's Gospel. It is what he is always doing. Jesus reverses business-as-usual. He preaches good news to the poor. Proclaims release to prisoners. Offers sight to the blind. He sets the oppressed free. One reversal after another. He calls us down from whatever tree we have climbed or been chased into, so we can move forward instead of backward. His attention opens us to the truth of our past and to new truths and directions for our future. New directions. Moving forward! We are called to be connected with brothers and sisters right here and beyond our congregation. God is watching and offering a purpose bigger than ourselves. More than we can even imagine. He wants to be with us in this home of ours—to come and stay with us. Imagine!

Many of you already know that I will retire-in-place this coming December 31. What does this mean? It means that with God's help, we can focus on developing a mission plan, to repurpose the Conboy Center that we built together 21 years ago. We rented it to pay for it and for the work we did on the chapel. What does this mean? By retiring-in-place it means that we can become mission driven rather than financially driven for a period of two years. A period of grace. To see what we can accomplish. What does this mean for me? It means that I don't count the cost and I hope you don't either. To be the Rector of Epiphany Church is not a job, it is a calling, a vocation—a way of life. To be part of Epiphany Church is not about being a member of an organization or a club—it is a calling, a belonging—a way of life. It is a privilege and a blessing.

*Epiphany, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your Chapel today.
So they hurried down and were happy to welcome him. "Whatever it takes,"
they said to the Lord. And Jesus said to them, "Today salvation has come
to this house, because you, all of you, are my brothers and sisters.
And then smiled slowly, and said quietly, "Ubuntu." We are all in this together—
a web of interconnectedness. "Ubuntu."*

AMEN.