

The 23rd Sunday after Pentecost, 31 October 2010
Saint James Episcopal Church, Tigard OR
The Rev'd Rags Ragan, Rector

The image of Zacchaeus up in a tree has captivated people since the writing of Luke's Gospel. There are paintings and icons and drawings, as well as children's books and assorted other forms of the story. There is a certain engaging silliness to it.

Jesus is on the road, going from place to place teaching and preaching and healing. He has come to Jericho, one of the most ancient cities in the world, built at an oasis along a traditional trading route. It is a place of commerce and connection, a busy place full of busy people, not a holy place like Jerusalem with its aura of worship and tradition. This is a place of serious business.

And Zacchaeus himself is a rich man, not merely a tax collector, but chief tax collector in one of the wealthiest places of the Palestinian province – so a serious man of business, who is probably taken very seriously by his neighbors. And yet here he is up in a tree!

Zacchaeus is big in money and power and influence, but short in physical height. He has heard about Jesus and wants to see him. Who knows what sort of stories he has heard – perhaps about miracles, perhaps about healing, perhaps about wise teaching. Perhaps he heard true stories of people's encounters with Jesus – and perhaps he heard some sort of wild exaggerations. Whatever he heard made him curious and anxious to see for himself.

Imagine his annoyance when he went out to the road to see this famous man – and could not see because the people in front were too tall! Zacchaeus could have demanded that people step aside. He could have ordered some of his employees to clear a way for him – or even perhaps to lift him on their shoulders. But he doesn't.

Zacchaeus is a resourceful and self-sufficient man. He looks around, assessing the situation, and sees a big tree next to the road. It must have had some strong low branches to make it possible to climb – and up he goes. The pictures are often made the more entertaining by the fact that Zacchaeus is portrayed wearing the voluminous robes typical of people in Bible pictures. Can you imagine trying to climb anything with all that cloth around you?

However difficult it may have been, Zacchaeus got himself up the tree in time to see Jesus and his entourage coming along the road. We do not know what he expected or what he thought when Jesus came into view, but I am sure he did not expect Jesus to call out to him. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay with you today."

The tax collector is delighted to be recognized in this way. He forgets everything else and scrambles down the tree to welcome Jesus into his house. He is thrilled and seems to be bubbling over with enthusiasm. It is easy to imagine him dashing about his house rearranging things to make room for his distinguished guests – setting the servants to preparing food and drink. It is an image of bustle and joy. From being a feared man of business, holding the community at his mercy, Zacchaeus has been transformed into an eager disciple – immediately. He seems to have climbed down the tree into a whole new life, all because Jesus noticed him and invited him into relationship.

Everyone who reads the story tends to like Zacchaeus, to laugh at his eagerness and embrace his joy. The people of his time, however, reacted differently. They already knew who this man was – he was a tax collector, one of those evil people who collaborated with the Roman occupation. He was a person made rich by the victimization of others. He was a sinner, not a person any true holy man would ever deign to spend time with.

They have decided who Zacchaeus is and they condemn Jesus for consorting with him. They see Jesus as contaminated by contact with a bad man – but what is really happening is that Zacchaeus is made new by his contact with the Messiah. Zacchaeus cannot make Jesus impure, but Jesus can make Zacchaeus holy.

Jesus recognizes Zacchaeus, calls him by his own name, and goes to stay in his house. Thus Zacchaeus is connected to God and the kingdom of God, to all that is real and true in life. It immediately changes his heart. He truly is not the same person who eagerly climbed the tree.

Without prompting, he promises to give half his possessions to the poor, and to more than restore anything he has wrongly taken from anyone. Zacchaeus is brimming with enthusiasm and a new understanding of life brought to him by Christ.

It is a wonderful and delightful story, filled with the enthusiastic, uninhibited joy of a unique character. It is no wonder that everyone loves Zacchaeus – and one hopes that even his proper, high-

minded neighbors eventually realized the transformation that Jesus had brought about in Zacchaeus and that it helped them not only have a relationship with the person they had scorned, but also have a truer appreciation of the healing and wholeness that Christ makes possible.

Diocesan Convention over the last few days had as its focus another story from Luke about Jesus meeting someone along the road. In this case, it was the road to Emmaus and it was the risen Christ encountering sad and disillusioned disciples leaving Jerusalem in despair. In that story, the people do not start out eagerly looking, because they have already given up. So Christ comes to them, catches them up and joins in their conversation, gradually helping them to understand what has happened. Then they invite this unrecognized stranger to join them for dinner – and they recognize him in the breaking of the bread. At that point we see a similar enthusiasm bursting forth. Like Zacchaeus, they realize that they have had a direct personal encounter with the divine. God in Christ has come to them, has talked to them, has eaten with them. They have been brought in to a whole new life and relationship. And, like Zacchaeus, they explode with enthusiasm – and run the whole seven miles back to Jerusalem to tell all their friends.

This story formed the framework for hearing about Bishop Michael's hundred day visits all around the diocese – as well as the framework for our work and worship together.

We began our Eucharist with a hymn I had never heard before and which quite captivated me. It is a lovely, singable tune, but what I loved was the text. I will read just a bit of it:

Who are you who walk in sorrow down Emmaus' barren road,
hearts distraught and hope defeated, bent beneath grief's crushing load?
Nameless mourners, we will join you, we who also mourn our dead.
We have stood by graves unyielding, eaten death's bare, bitter bread.

Who are we who travel with you on our way through life to death?
Women, men, the young, the aging, wakened by the Spirit's breath!
At the font you claim and name us, born of water and the Word.
At the table still you feed us, host us as our Risen Lord!

Alleluia! Alleluia! is the Eater hymn we sing!
Take our life, our joy, our worship as the gift of love we bring.
You have formed us all one people called from ev'ry land and race.
Make your church your servant Body, sent to share your healing grace!

What a lovely poem! In it we address the people around us, anyone grieving, burdened, sad, and offer them our companionship – admitting that we too know grief and pain. We know what it is to have people we love die, as was most evident in our lovely All Souls service last night in which we prayed for more than 100 individuals by name.

We tell people, "we know the despair of loneliness. We will walk with you and share your grief. But we have met Christ along our own sorrowful road and he too walks with us. He speaks to our hearts and brings us to himself."

Christ does feed us and heal us and make us the ones who can call out to Zacchaeus and Cleopas and everyone who is looking for healing and comfort.

The hymn gives us a lovely image of the church as a band of people who may have come with all the enthusiasm and sinfulness of Zacchaeus, or may have come with the crushed spirits of Cleopas and his companion on the way to Emmaus – but all of whom have been able to bring all their troubles and pain to one who loves each and every one of us, who welcomes us and calls us each by name. We have found an extraordinary connection to the divine and to one another – and we can in turn share that connection with everyone.

With those images in our hearts, we can truly be Christ's body blessing the world. Amen.