



LAKWOOD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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Out on a Limb  
Luke 19: 1-10

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On October 31<sup>st</sup> 1517 the priest and professor of theology Martin Luther, sent a letter to Albert Archbishop of Mainz which included his 95 theses. He also nailed the 95 theses to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenburg on that date or maybe a few days later. This date and this event has been recognized through history as the Reformation ground zero and that is why we recognize the last Sunday in October as Reformation Sunday. So happy Reformation Day, we can celebrate by partying and talking about justification by faith alone and the sovereignty of God! I love a good Reformation Day party.

I am sure that Martin Luther did not plan to change the world but his 95 theses sparked something in those who read it, those who agreed and those who disagreed. The main target of his thesis was the abuse of selling indulgences in the church at the time. Indulgences were considered to reduce time in purgatory for an individual or loved ones. There had become a practice by some priests to sell these indulgences, and people would buy them for themselves or family members. Luther understood that this meant the people didn't need to be repentant, as they could buy their grace. He also saw that the people were lining the pockets of the priests and the church instead of supporting the poor and needy. His thesis was intended to spark debate, he loved the church and wanted to reform the church. I don't he had in mind a movement that would birth hundreds of denominations including one that bears his name.

Reformation Sunday seems like a good day to consider what Luther did by distributing his thesis. He understood that scripture taught salvation was through faith in Jesus only, not the works of indulgences. He brought good news, he brought people closer to Christ. But it came with risk. I was dangerous, to certain extent he put himself out on a limb. He perhaps was not a complete lone voice but at the time he definitely spoke out against tide of current popular opinion and certainly would have annoyed many of his colleagues who were profiting from indulgence abuse. He was picking a fight with possibly the most powerful organization in the world at the time. Luther's reputation, his career as a priest and a professor of theology was on the line. His thesis was eventually banned by the church, and he was excommunicated as a heretic a few years later, but what he did changed the world.

What Luther believed about faith alone being sufficient, is shown in our lectionary passage today which comes from Luke chapter 19. It is the story of another man who went out on a limb, quite literally, a tax collector called Zacchaeus. You may have heard of Zacchaeus, if you spent a lot of time in Sunday School through the years you may well know that Zacchaeus was a ..... That's right. A wee little man. I wonder if whoever wrote that knew that wee and little mean the same thing. It's a bit redundant. I've mentioned that before, I just need to get over it!

It's good to remember that Zacchaeus was wee, and bear in the mind most scholars believe the average height of a man at that time was 5 feet 5 inches, so the chances are Zacchaeus was around 5 feet. His height plays big part in the story. Let's read the passage from Luke 19. Reading from verse 1.

*Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup> A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax*

collector and was wealthy. <sup>3</sup> He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. <sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. <sup>5</sup> When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." <sup>6</sup> So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. <sup>7</sup> All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." <sup>8</sup> But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." <sup>9</sup> Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

There are a couple of things for us to think about before we look at the interaction between Jesus and Zacchaeus. We already know that he was wee, that is why he climbs the sycamore tree. We also learn that Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector and therefore wealthy. You may have heard that tax collectors were not very popular with God's people back then. Now that's makes me wonder if tax collectors are popular today? I love the old joke about the tax man walking along the side of a Glasgow canal and he fell in. Someone ran over, reached out for him and said "Give me your hand," the tax man continued to struggle in the water. A second person said "Give me your hand," no response. Then a third person came to help (it's always the third person) and asked the man, "what do you do for living." He said, "I'm tax collector." The third person said, "Here take my hand." This time he reached out and was saved. The third person said to the other two, never ask a tax man to give you anything.

Zacchaeus would have bid for the right to collect taxes for the Romans. And this was Jericho, Jericho was known to be a place of wealth, so the taxes could be higher. He would collect what was due plus some extra to skim off the top for himself. And we read that Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, He would have overseen a certain region. This would have left him very wealthy. It would also have left him very unpopular. Zacchaeus was also a Jew. Not only was this man robbing them, but he was also their Jewish brother. He was probably seen as a traitor and shunned.

But Jesus has a habit of reaching out to and bringing hope to people that are shunned. We think of the Samaritan women at the well, we think of the women caught in sin, who they wanted to stone, we think of the leper in Mark 1 whom Jesus touches and heals. Story after story of Jesus interacting with those that have been shunned. These are people forced to the fringes, outsiders. Stories of lives transformed and filled with hope when none was there. But it's not that Jesus only loved those on the fringes, he saw opportunity to love all. He dined and interacted with rich and poor, powerful and powerless, but he seems to have a soft spot for those on the outside.

And that is the case with Zacchaeus, here was a guy who was willing to take a risk to get close to Jesus. He was willing to do what was probably unthinkable for a man of his position. Climbing trees was an activity for children. Yet here we find this wealthy man, in the undignified position of hanging from a tree, risking his reputation, probably being teased for being up there just so he could to see Jesus, and by the way Jesus was becoming popular at this point, there are crowds all around him, this man who robs his brothers and sisters, who is employed by Rome, who has no friends, humbling himself so that he can get closer to Jesus and we find this man who has no friends being befriended by Jesus.

Zacchaeus takes the risk of ridicule, an undignified risk just so he can get closer to Jesus. He doesn't care what the people in the crowd think, he just wants to get closer, just wants to see clearer. I would suggest that we can learn from Zacchaeus. For us to get closer to Jesus, for us to see Jesus clearer, we may have to run the risk of ridicule, we may need to humble ourselves and not be over concerned with what others say. We may need

to block out the noise of the crowd so that we can focus on the words of Jesus. And when living this life of faith we realize that we are often swimming against the tide of popular opinion, and we are called to do what is right when all around us are moving in a different direction, and that can happen every day in school, or in your workplace, we can take inspiration from Zacchaeus who only cared about being closer to Jesus. Jesus sees him. That alone is important, the one on the fringes is seen. We read on in the story that Jesus invites himself over for dinner at Zacchaeus place, which incidentally produces some muttering and grumbling amongst the crowd. You see that in verse 7, *“All the people saw this and began to mutter, “He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.”* I recognize that. That kind of grumbling is all too common in our modern churches, isn't it? When things don't go our way, we grumble. When the wrong people are doing something in a way we wouldn't, when something is not the way we've always done it. We grumble. I'm going to suggest we can learn from Zacchaeus and Jesus in this story, but we can also learn what not to do. Don't be a grumbler.

So, Jesus invites himself for dinner, despite the muttering. Jesus doesn't seem to see the labels attached Zacchaeus, tax collector, therefore unclean, traitor, he sees someone who needs hope. He sees the lost whom he came to save. I believe that is what Jesus sees when he meets the powerful and the powerless, that stuff means nothing to him, he sees people he loves who need hope. When he sees you, he is not swayed by what others think, he doesn't see the labels you've been given, your large bank account or your empty bank account, he sees someone he loves who needs hope. Perhaps the most important part to remember is Jesus sees you.

And when Jesus eats with him, Zacchaeus, announces that he will give half his money to the poor and will pay back four times any stolen money. Jesus announces that today salvation has come to this house.

We take inspiration from this almost childlike excitement of Zacchaeus to be close to Jesus. We ask ourselves, what would I do to hear him clearer, so see him better. Are there risks I would take. Would I be undignified; would I risk ridicule to do what is right?

But we take inspiration from Jesus and we ask ourselves, would I see the one on the outside. Would I see beyond labels and prejudices to see the one who needs hope, who needs to know they are loved? Would I eat with them and help restore dignity to the undignified? Am I willing to be the hands and feet of Christ?

Wow, there is lot for us to rest with in the story, so much to ponder, there is so much inspiration to take from Zacchaeus and Jesus, so much to challenge us. It is a simple short interaction, but it is rich nourishment for our soul. May we take time to let it soak in. And when the opportunity arises to climb a sycamore tree to see and hear Jesus more clearly. Ignore the muttering, choose to climb. Amen.