

From Wee to Wow

Luke 19:1-10

Sample Sermon

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The story about Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus found in Luke is one with which many of us are familiar. For those who have grown up in and around church, we remember the song retelling the story of Zacchaeus and his desire to see Jesus – "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he." Although this song that is emblazoned in our minds tells of this wonderful encounter with Jesus, it leaves the listener in suspense as to what happens once Jesus goes and visits Zacchaeus at his home. We are left without knowing the powerful impact rendered upon Zacchaeus' life and the effects of this transforming experience.

As we move beyond the remembrances of this childhood song and into the passage we explore today, our attention focuses on the calling of Zacchaeus and how this experience challenges us to examine our own callings. For some, this is a calling perhaps explored but one that has not been personally embraced. For many of us, we have encountered Jesus and have opportunity today to reassess how we have, and continue, to respond to Christ in living out our callings.

Interestingly, Luke is the only writer to capture this simple story of Jesus' journey through Jericho. We learn that Zacchaeus was a wealthy tax collector. Although not articulated in the story, we are left to our own imaginations that Zacchaeus' wealth came from perhaps unscrupulous tactics used in collecting taxes from those in his community. He was considered a sinner, and there are examples of other tax collectors who were dishonest in their collection methods.¹ Of particular interest, however, is Zacchaeus' desire to see Jesus. Again, we are left to our imaginations as to why Zacchaeus wanted to see him, but perhaps it was the same curiosity and desire that drives us to a presidential motorcade route for a glimpse of the president or to gather and hopefully get close enough to shake the hand of the Pope or the Queen of England when they visit the States. We can only presume that Zacchaeus had heard of the miraculous stories of Jesus healing the blind and the lame, as well as rumors that Jesus was the Son of God.

We learn very quickly that Zacchaeus was a short man, or as one might express in today's vernacular, Zacchaeus was *vertically challenged*. This is the first point of reflection – if you have the desire, you can overcome any challenge in life to encounter Jesus. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus but couldn't because of the crowd. He was blocked from view or access to Jesus due to his height. Here's where we need to ask ourselves a question. What hinders each of us from seeing and experiencing Jesus in the way he desires? For some, the answer may be related to a physical condition from birth or by the randomness of life's circumstances which creates an emotional entrapment too great to fully embrace the grace and peace Jesus has to offer. Others may be hindered by their proclivities or choices, things driven by self-interest, self-gratification, power, greed, or the like, which creates an imbalance in their lives and distances them from a holistic relationship with God. Whatever the circumstances, rather than allow those hindrances to prevent us from our own encounters with Jesus, we need to take a cue from Zacchaeus and climb a tree.

Brad, a young 20-something engaged in ministry to his faith community, has endured the pain of losing someone he loved. His girlfriend of six months was struck and killed by a truck while jogging. He was devastated by the loss, and many in his congregation wondered whether he would fall apart and move away from the faith that he had shared so openly. Brad admitted that he was destroyed at that point, but he trusted God and wanted his life to be used to encourage others who experience challenges in their lives.

A devoted wife and mother of two, Chloe had her world turned upside down as she relocated with her family to a new community, one which might as well have been on the other side of the world. Her friends, her faith community, her identity – all had suddenly disappeared. She struggled as she began the process of putting the pieces back together, but she continued to put her faith in God and trust that God had a plan for her and her family. She realized God could and would use her in this new place.

Both Brad and Chloe had to climb a proverbial tree to see Jesus, to experience the love and grace that each of them needed. What drove them to seek Jesus? They had a desire. Just as Zacchaeus sought out Jesus, Brad and Chloe had a desire to move beyond their challenges and experience the presence of Jesus. Each of us who seek to understand who we are and what we are to be about must desire to encounter Jesus with the same tenacity and ingenuity as Zacchaeus and overcome whatever challenges hinder our pathway to experiencing the fullness of God.

As this story continues, we also witness how quickly Zacchaeus' life is transformed. **That is the second point of reflection – once you encounter Jesus, your life ought to reflect the transformation that has taken place.** We must use our imaginations once again as we envision the conversation that took place between Jesus and Zacchaeus. We know Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus gladly to his home and responded enthusiastically to the call extended by Jesus to follow as his disciple. Zacchaeus' life was so dramatically changed that he committed giving half of his possessions to the poor. He got it! His priorities were reoriented to reflect the priorities of Jesus – concern for the poor, the suffering, the outcasts, and the enslaved. Zacchaeus even felt compelled in offering to pay back four times whatever he had wrongfully taken from those whom he had cheated. His life was transformed, and he willingly demonstrated the change that had occurred in his life.

Aaron, another young man in his 20's, had heard God's call to serve the poor. As he prepared for his departure, he shared this message to family and friends, "Pray that I would learn the secret of being content whatever the circumstance; that I would not focus on maintaining a lifestyle, but rather on fulfilling a calling." Without any plans as to where he would live or how he would sustain himself, Aaron left Virginia for Boston with a few hundred dollars in his pocket. He found a job working with a nonprofit food organization and met an unlikely acquaintance, Ma Siss, who recruited him to form a church in her inner-city neighborhood. Before long, people in the community were calling him "Bishop."

Aaron's life depicted one that had been transformed, and his priorities in life became those of his Transformer's. Zacchaeus was so sold out to Jesus and his vision that he went from being a wee little man to a man of wow! Whether we respond to Christ as Zacchaeus or Aaron did, our lives should reflect the fact that we have been transformed. The radical nature of Jesus' calling to each of us should manifest itself in such a way that our transformation is demonstrated in how we live our lives, not just for the one day we first encounter Jesus, but for every day we live. That's the essence of calling.

As this story concludes, we hear Jesus' pronouncement of Zacchaeus' salvation and his proclamation that he has come to seek and to save. We also are left knowing only that which has been revealed in the story. **It is at this juncture a third and final point awaits our reflection – through your vocation, you answer God's call.** We leave this story knowing Zacchaeus has been, and we assume continues to be, a tax collector. It is interesting to note in certain encounters with Jesus that some leave their vocations to follow Christ, yet in this situation Zacchaeus is not called to leave his vocation but rather called to live his vocation. His vocation does not change, but we know the manner in which he lives out his vocation has changed.

At Bluefield College, one key initiative in the strategic plan is "to enable students to hear and respond to their call." Although a number of students arrive knowing God is calling them into missions or ministry, not every student who comes to the College is pursuing a vocation in ministry. That's why the College believes this is an essential step in helping young people – regardless of their planned vocation – develop an understanding about themselves, their gifts, and how God can best use those gifts through their vocations.

The word “vocation” is rooted in Latin and means “voice.”² Parker Palmer, a Quaker theologian and teacher, notes: “Vocation does not mean a goal that I pursue. It means a calling that I hear.”³ Vocation is a process of listening for the truths and values held in the heart, and for the called, it is a heart that reflects the heart of God. That is why Zacchaeus could no longer live his life of vocation as an act of his will. Rather, he listened to his heart, a transformed heart, and one that changed who he was and how he lived his life.

Have you experienced God’s calling? My prayer is that your answer is yes and that you seek God’s guidance as to how your transformation is reflected in your life. God wants us to be people of wow! Now, let’s go live it out.

Bibliography

1. Robertson, A. T. (1930). *Word Pictures of the New Testament*. Nashville: Broadman.
2. Palmer, Parker J. (2000). *Let Your Life Speak*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
3. Palmer, Parker J. (2000). *Let Your Life Speak*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

