

SERMON “JESUS BRINGS US INTO GOD’S KINGDOM OF JOY”

(Luke 19:1-10 Preached on October 30th, 2016)

Hopefully all us can remember when we were children and we used to sing a song in Sunday school about Zacchaeus, a wee little man. The words go, “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, A wee little man was he, He climbed up in a 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.”

We loved that song, in part, because we were wee little kids, and found the thought of a wee little man amusing. We loved it, in part, because the wee little man--small like us--was the hero of the story. When we sang about the "wee little man," we held our thumb and forefinger about an inch apart to show how small he was.

I still enjoy the story of Zacchaeus—in part because of that song—and in part because it is an amusing but happy story: Amusing, because it involves a short but rich man climbing a tree to see Jesus. Happy, because it shows Jesus welcoming this man whom nobody else liked. It says that Jesus saved him—brought salvation to his house—restored him to be a son of Abraham—I believe Jesus brought Zacchaeus into God’s kingdom of JOY!

And it is also a happy story because of the last verse. In the last verse of the story, Jesus talks about you and me. Listen to what he says: "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save that which was lost". That's you and me. We were lost. Jesus came to save us but of course, in this story, Jesus was referring to Zacchaeus, who was lost.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector, and was probably dishonest. His “franchise” territory assigned by Rome was Jericho, a major trading town serving as the main customs point for all imports into Palestine from the East. It was deep in the Jordan valley, about 30 kilometers east of Jerusalem. Zacchaeus, as the "chief tax collector" of the area, would take a cut for himself from the taxes he raised for the Roman administration. In today's terms he would be a kind of corrupt politician, very wealthy, very hated. People hated him—no doubt about that!

My guess is that Zacchaeus felt that God hated him too—but God didn't hate him. If God needed reasons to hate Zacchaeus, he could surely find them. Zacchaeus had

probably gotten rich by overcharging poor people. God has very little patience with rich people who cheat poor people. If God wanted to condemn Zacchaeus, he could find plenty of reasons for doing so—and Zacchaeus knew it.

But God didn't want to condemn Zacchaeus. God wanted to SAVE him! That is the happiest part of this story. That is the GOOD NEWS of the Gospel! Zacchaeus didn't deserve to be saved, but God WANTED to save him. We know that because of something that Jesus said. When Jesus spotted Zacchaeus up in the sycamore tree, he said: "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house" (v. 5).

For Jesus to single out Zacchaeus conferred great honor on him. And Jesus was very popular. People loved him. People wanted to hear him—to touch him—to get near enough to him so that even his shadow would touch them—to have Jesus pray for them. Jesus was a great celebrity. For him to go to Zacchaeus' home was like having the president come to lunch. It was hard to imagine such an honor. It would have been especially hard for Zacchaeus to imagine that Jesus would come to his house, because everyone knew that Zacchaeus was a sinner. If Jesus were going to honor someone with a visit, surely he would honor a saint! But, no! Jesus decided to honor this sinner! Amazing!

Jesus explained his visit this way. He said, "Zacchaeus, today I **MUST** stay at your house." This little word, "**must**" is important. In the original Greek, the word is *dei*. *Dei* suggests a Godly duty. When Jesus says that he **MUST** stay at Zacchaeus' house today, he means that God has called him to do this. It was no accident then that Jesus spotted Zacchaeus sitting up in the sycamore tree. Just as Zacchaeus was trying to see Jesus, Jesus was trying to see Zacchaeus. Jesus was looking for Zacchaeus, because he had a God-given duty to seek him and to save him.

The crowd didn't get it. They grumbled, "He has gone in to lodge with a man who is a sinner." But Zacchaeus got it! When he realized what Jesus was doing for him, he welcomed Jesus with JOY! The original Greek says that Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus with JOY! Zacchaeus could hardly imagine that Jesus would honor him by visiting his house, and his heart was full of JOY! And then Zacchaeus, in his great JOY, said: "Behold, Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor. If I have wrongfully exacted anything of anyone, I restore four times as much."

We are in chapter 19 of Luke. In chapter 18, Luke told about Jesus' encounter with another rich man—a rich man who refused Jesus—a rich man who loved his money more than he loved Christ—a rich man who went away sadly when Jesus told him to sell everything he owned and give his money to the poor.

Now Luke tells us this story about Zacchaeus, another rich man—but one who loves Jesus—a man who in his JOY at meeting Christ decides to do something that Jesus has not even asked. Notice, Zacchaeus “VOLUNTEERS” to give half of his money to the poor, because he loves Jesus more than he loves money. He loves Jesus because of the JOY that Jesus has given him by singling him out—because of the JOY that Jesus has given him by coming to his house and loving him.

Notice Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house." TODAY! Not tomorrow! Not next week! Not in the eternal hereafter! But TODAY! It has already happened. Zacchaeus has been saved—restored as a son of Abraham—restored as a child of God. And it isn't just Zacchaeus who was saved. Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house." He means that Zacchaeus whole' family has been saved too.

Jesus even lays the groundwork for the salvation of the community. They will see that Zacchaeus means business. They will see him give money to the poor. They will see him make restitution. They will see him begin to treat them fairly. They will begin to trust him. This rich and powerful man will become an honored, beloved member of the community. Who knows what wonderful things he will do! That is part of what Jesus means when he says, "Today salvation has come to this house."

And then, in the last verse, Jesus explains. He says, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." That's Jesus' job! That's Jesus' calling! Jesus has come to SEEK OUT sinners—to look for sinners hiding in the trees—to search for sinners who have gone astray. Jesus has come to SAVE them--to save the lost—to bring them home—to redeem them—to make them whole again.

So I love this story—not just because of the cute little Sunday school song—not just because of the cute gestures that go along with it—and not just because it's a happy story. I love this story, because it's YOURS and MY story. The Lord has been seeking me too—seeking to save me. The Lord started seeking to save me before I was born. The Lord started seeking to save me when Jesus became God in the flesh, born in a

manger—on earth Jesus lived, taught, healed, and died on a cross and God raised Him from the dead! Jesus came through a television set one night, May 20, 2002 at 10 pm to seek me out and visit my home just like Zacchaeus!

The Lord started seeking to save me when he moved Margie and I back to Charlotte so we could start attending Mallard Creek Presbyterian church. The Lord started seeking to save me when he led me and made it possible to attend Union Presbyterian seminary and graduate and called Margie and I out to MPC.

I believe the Lord started seeking to save us when he inspired Luke to put the story of Zacchaeus in his Gospel. The Lord started seeking to save us before the creation of the world (See John 1:1-18) I don't know why the Lord would do that. I don't know why the Lord would care about us. We have disappointed him. We have broken his heart. We have done nothing to deserve his favor.

But the Lord has been seeking us since BEFORE the day that he separated the waters from the dry land—since BEFORE the day that he set the sun in the sky. The Lord has been seeking us since BEFORE the beginning of time. The Lord has been seeking to move us from the Kingdom of Darkness and bring us into the Kingdom of JOY!

Some of us have been found. Others are still lost. All of us, in some measure, are still lost. We often find ourselves like the Apostle Paul, doing bad things we don't want to do—and then failing to do good things we want to do (Romans 7:14-25). Like Paul, we know that we are not just a sinner, but chief among sinners (1 Timothy 1:15).

But the Lord is searching for us today—not like the Gestapo during Hitler's reign—not like a traffic cop with stealthy radar—not like a telemarketer, looking for a quick buck—but like a loving Father seeking His beloved children—seeking to bring us JOY!

In his book, *Healing of Memories*, David Seamands, author, scholar and leader in evangelical renewal movements within the United Methodist Church, born in India to Methodist missionary parents and spending much of his boyhood there—David tells the dramatic and true story of John Everingham, an Australian journalist working in Laos. John fell in love with a Laotian woman named Keo, but the Communists forced John to leave Laos and he had to leave Keo behind. But that's not the end of the story. The Mekong River separates Laos from Thailand. If John could get Keo across the Mekong,

they could be together again. But the Mekong is a big river—a wide river—and the mission was dangerous. If the Communists learned of John's scheme, they would arrest both he and Keo too.

So John worked out a plan. He decided to use scuba gear to cross the river underwater. He would carry scuba gear for Keo, and together they would swim underwater to Thailand. John managed to get word to Keo to meet him at the river. At the appointed time, he donned his scuba gear and set out across the river. But the water was murky and the current carried him downstream. When he surfaced, he was far from the meeting point. So he swam back to Thailand, walked upstream, and tried again. By the time he crossed the river again Keo was gone. Exhausted and desperate, John took a terrible chance—he yelled her name. Keo heard, she came running.

John showed Keo how to use the scuba gear, and they made their way into the water. She didn't know how to swim, so he pulled her across the river underwater.

After a very long time, they crawled exhausted onto the shore in Thailand. They were safe! They were free! They were saved! Isn't that a lovely story! It's a story of true devotion and love that is willing to risk everything to win the beloved.

My friends, that's the way that Jesus is seeking you right now. That's the way that Jesus is calling you. That's the way that Jesus is trying to save you. That's the way that Jesus is loving you. Jesus wants nothing more than to bring you to the safety of the other shore. He wants nothing more than to bring you into God's Kingdom of JOY! You and I have a choice. We can be like the rich young ruler who, when he heard what discipleship was going to cost him, went away sorrowfully. But don't be like that. Instead, we can choose to be like Zacchaeus, who was glad to see Jesus—overwhelmed to know that Jesus cared and loved him—he was thrilled to move into the Kingdom of JOY!

Today salvation has come for all of us! If you decide to let Jesus lead you into God's kingdom of joy, repent of your sins and receive Christ today, I ask you to pray this prayer with me in the silence of your hearts: *“Father, I know that I have broken your laws and my sins have separated me from you. I am truly sorry, and now I want to turn away from my past sinful life toward you. Please forgive me, and help me avoid sinning again. I believe that your son, Jesus Christ died for my sins, was resurrected from the dead, is alive, and hears my prayer. I invite Jesus to become the Lord of my life, to rule and reign in my heart from this day forward. Please send your Holy Spirit*

to help me obey You, and to do Your will for the rest of my life.” I hope that prayer will bring those of you who have not made that decision to let Christ bring you into God’s kingdom of JOY! Hallelujah! Amen! Let us pray.