

# FRIENDS IN LOW PLACES

*The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME*

Monday, November 4, 2019

Scripture: [Luke 19:1–10](#)

## INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

Today, we'll hear about a meeting between Jesus, and a tax collector named Zaccheus. The jokes kind of write themselves here, but you will be shocked to hear that people had feelings about tax collectors back then. Most especially because tax collectors under the Roman Empire were kind of free agents. Their job was to collect taxes... but the system was loose enough that it was an entrepreneurial kind of gig. See, you needed to go out and collect a certain amount for the empire... but, if there was left over money beyond that, well... well, that was extra. So, tax collectors of this time are associated with running all sorts of schemes to get that extra money to line their own pockets. You'd be mad, too, if the IRS folks got to make up their own amounts at the end of the year, and could get rich doing it.

This is the implication of the life that Zaccheus had... until one day a teacher came to town...

## SERMON

We always seem to say, “perspective matters a great deal.” We teach ourselves and our kids the old adage to “imagine ourselves in other people’s shoes,” but it’s important to remember that even our imagination about that will probably be shaped by our own shoes and what we’ve learned by wearing them through our lives. Where you locate yourself has a great deal to do with what you see and experience.

Ultimately, I think the amazing piece of our story today is how our view on the world can shift, and how that can lead us to a whole new life.

Let me say, I don’t think that our scripture stories include things for no reason. So, reading this scripture this week, it occurred to me: “Did our ancestors really just want to make a short joke about Zaccheus?” I don’t think so. It would be a pretty mean way to start a story about someone finding new life in Jesus’s ministry... finding God, indeed.

Where do you find God? Where do you look for God? In what direction is God in your life?

Growing up, I was learned (almost by osmosis) that prayers for being sorry I looked down for, and prayers about asking, particularly big asks... I looked up. Most of our churches have been built this way through the years... they draw our eyes *up* to find God... and indeed, inside or outside a church, most of our ancestors have identified God in one direction: *up*.

Through all the years, people who have sought authority and power have used this... you look *up* at a judge in a courtroom, the speakers at a fancy event are *up*, promotions at work probably meant you were getting on an elevator and moving to a new office in the sky, *up*. We give so much of our attention to *up*.

Zaccheus has spent his life worrying about the people in the high places. We get this whole routine about how he's not very tall... he looks up. But even more, he is a Jewish tax collector in the Roman Empire. He's become a servant to the powerful, against the powerless. He has positioned himself to comfort the comfortable, on the off chance that he will be allowed to move up to that same comfort.

The irony, and the power and the glory of this tale of one who has been looking, working, serving, climbing *up*... it's when he changes his perspective, when he looks *down*, that he finally sees God. And wants to give all he can to live more fully with God.

See, we all have been taught to look *up*, completely forgetting the whole thing that what we say has happened in Jesus is that God came to ground level, and inhabits us and life at street level, not the penthouse suite.

What is our deepest aspiration? Our dream? What do we want to be when we grow... *up*? You see how this kind of thing works? You even grow *up*!

We can become too afraid of mis-steps that might make us slip, we can, like the crowd who grumble at Jesus going to Zaccheus's house, create whole new hierarchies in which to put ourselves above others... much more sure that we are deserving of a visit from God.

But we are reminded that the invitation of God is to look down, look at the faces of one another, and welcome one another... we are reminded that we are not the riches we accumulate, but rather, the pure humanity which holds God's spirit and presence.

"We may ignore, but we can nowhere evade the presence of God. The world is crowded with Him. He walks everywhere incognito. And the incognito is not always hard to penetrate. The real labor is to remember, to attend. In fact, to come awake. Still more, to remain awake." <sup>[1]</sup>

So we need to examine our lives for good old "height bias" in life and in faith...

- Do we strive for or exemplify life styles that are about access to resources, do we judge those that don't have that access?

- Do we value forms of spiritual expression that are only available to a few?
- Do we focus on the ways in which we can get ahead (get above), and lose focus on who may be falling behind (below)?

Jesus calls Zaccheus *down*, down to face up to what he has done in the past, but also to make friends down at ground level... because that's where God is.... in each of us and all of us... waiting to be invited in.

A few weeks ago, leaders in the United Church of Christ gathered in Chicago. Both representatives of our national church, and Trinity UCC of Chicago... they had an announcement to make. It turns out that for a little while, they had been purchasing the unpaid medical debt of residents around their neighborhoods... and in one day they announced that they had forgiven \$5.3 million dollars of medical debt. <sup>[2]</sup>

We have to look at those systems which lay people so low that they are straining and craning to see a hope above it. Americans last year borrowed \$88 million dollars to pay medical bills. <sup>[3]</sup> Educational (1.6 trillion) <sup>[4]</sup> and medical debt is soaring. Even more, we have to remember, stay awake, look down... whatever helps you to remember that all of our striving, if it pulls us away from the humanity (and thus, the holiness) of others, is worthless.

Jesus has come to save the lost, even those of us who can so easily get a crick in our neck looking up... has come to remind of God's presence in our neighbors, deserving or undeserving, high or low, and has called for us to welcome them, and be welcomed by them into oneness of life.

May we all get that invitation in this life: to look down, to see the face of God in one another, and to be invited to play host to the presence of Christ in our own homes, our own communities, and in the world.

Amen.

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1. Lewis, C.S., *Letters to Malcolm: Chiefly on Prayer* (New York: Harcourt Brace & World, 1964), 75 ↩
  2. [UCC forgives millions in debt in Chicago, announces national effort](#) ↩
  3. [Survey from West Health and Gallup](#) ↩
  4. [St. Louis Fed](#) ↩