

¹ He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ² A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³ He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵ When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "**Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.**" ⁶ So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷ All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸ Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." ⁹ Then Jesus said to him, "**Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.**" ¹⁰ **For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."**

"Like A Tree"

First Presbyterian Church, Charlotte

August 13, 2012 | 11:00 am Worship Service

If we listen carefully to our scripture this morning, we may hear a lot of noise. Following Jesus is a crowd, perhaps that same crowd who just witnessed Jesus healing Bartimeaus in the previous chapter of Luke. The same crowd who told Bartimeaus to be quiet, yet praised God when Bartimeaus received his sight. Yes, this crowd is a character with a cacophony of commentary. Facebook messages, twitter feeds, and scrolling headlines on local news channels were posting the activities of Jesus and the media frenzy has a crowd clamoring around Jesus.

Among the crowd is Zaccheaus. He too is buzzing with his own noise. When Luke tells us that Zaccheaus

is a chief tax collector and he is rich, we are privy to the commentary on Zaccheaus. As a tax collector, Zaccheus has become rich by taking more taxes than he needs and pocketing profits for himself. And as chief tax collector, Luke lets us know that Zacheaus is really good at what he does. So Zaccheus has few friends in this crowd. In fact, folk can hardly believe that Jesus would even bother with Zaccheaus. His critics are so loud that Luke records the chatter. *Jesus has done it now. Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.* The grapevine is stirring - And the crowd grumbles with resentment because Zaccheaus has wronged them. While Zaccheaus stands tall in the Roman ranking, he is

held in low regard among the people.

Perhaps this is why Luke describes Zacheauss as short in stature....this characterization - more than a physical description. Though Zaccheaus ranks high as a *chief* tax collector, among his community, he is coming up short.

This poignant description captured by Luke is nothing short of the human predicament. For all of us have some positions where we stand tall, and some relationships where we are coming up short. We don't like to admit it because it's always easier to see where others are coming up short. In the book, *the*

Ragamuffin Gospel, Brennan Manning tells the story of a man who had sinned greatly. And his sin was so great, that his church excommunicated him. The man repented. He wanted reconciliation. He wanted to come to church again so he went to the Lord, and said, “Lord, they won’t let me in because I am a sinner.” To which the Lord replied, “What are you complaining about, they won’t let me in either.” Sometimes we forget that we too are in need of the grace of God. We don’t like to admit it. It's always easier to look down on someone else.

But the truth is, we may be chief in some positions, but in other areas, in our relationships, among those

close to us, we may find ourselves coming up short. We may be chief on our job, but coming up short in spending time with our children, chief in accomplishing our professional aspirations, but coming up short in stewarding intimate space in our marriage, chief in tending to the work of the church, but coming up short in cultivating our faith in Christ; there are churches, chief in creating committees and commissions, (Let every Presbyterian say Amen) yet we too often come up short with fulfilling Christ Great Commission. We may be chief in some areas, but there are places in our lives where we come up short. Just yesterday, I read that the unemployment rate for the Iraq and Afghanistan war

veterans has remained above the civilian rate for several years, standing at 12.7 percent, compared with the 7.7 percent unemployment rate among nonveterans. Our nation is chief in producing military technology, but we're coming up short in the promise of being a place of opportunity for everyone. Oh yes, we may be chief in some areas, but there are places in our lives where we're coming up short.

And the noise of our critics and the noise within our own conscious can crowd our lives such that it is difficult to see the One who can transform and redeem us. *Luke tells us that Zaccheaus was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not,*

because he was short in stature.

So Zaccheaus runs ahead, and climbs a sycamore tree. Mother Theresa made the observation that trees, flower, and grass grow in silence. In his book, *The Chosen*, Chaim Potok, American Jewish author and rabbi, says, “I've begun to realize that you can listen to silence and learn from it. I find it fascinating that in the midst of this noisy crowd, in the cacophony of critics who are grumbling about Zaccheaus and Jesus, the sycamore tree speaks without saying anything at all... And we do well to listen.

With its heavy trunk and with its long and wide branches, the tree is sacramentally situated if you will –

it is a visible mean of an invisible grace. You see, this tree provides a place for a sinner to sit and encounter Jesus. And this is just how the grace of God operates. Grace does not shorten her arms, but with her strong trunk and with her long and wide branches, grace *lifts us up so that we can see the Savior and hear the Savior calling us.*

In the midst of noisy critics who would cut us off from connecting to Christ, and in the midst of the noise that will negate our knowing of Jesus, grace takes root, holding us up so that we might be lifted a little taller – taller in our love for God and love for neighbor, taller in our parenting, taller in our marriages, taller in our

decision making, taller in our gratitude, taller in compassion, taller in justice. Sin has us coming up short, yet I suspect we are here this morning because we have a hope that the grace of Christ may lift us so that we might rise and grow a little taller.

When Jesus calls out to Zaccheus, though there are a cacophony of critics around him, he is held up by the tree and because of the tree, he is able to see and hear Jesus call him. And when Zaccheus comes down the tree, something has happened. *His soul, once covered in the stain of greed and injustice, is now covered in the sap of the sycamore. Something has happened.* Zaccheus comes down from the tree no

longer running, but Luke describes him as standing.

And standing, Zaccheaus says, **Half of my possession I will give to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone I will pay four times as much.**

Zaccheaus is bearing the fruit of repentance. He's been changed. His transformation could be put in the language of an old African American hymn: Something on the inside working on the outside, oh what a change in my life! It's because, in the midst of the noise, grace speaks silently and stands solidly inside, lifting us and leading us to the One who can transform us – that we are able to stand a little taller. *Zaccheaus is no longer running, but he is now standing.*

Touched by grace, the crook has become a Christ follower. The swindler has become the saint. *The* one who was hurting is now helping. The lost has been found. ... I don't know about you, but I'm so glad that where others put a period, God puts a comma. Jesus says to Zaccheaus, Today Salvation has come to **your house**. Today, those who have been wronged are receiving justice. Today, there are new possibilities with Christ. Today, the old has past and all things have become new! Today, sinners are reconciled back to God! **Today, you who were saved by the tree shall become like a tree** –planted to lift and lead someone to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. The prophet Jeremiah was on

to something, when he said, blessed is the one whose trust is in the Lord, they shall be **like a tree** planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit.”

Let it be according to God’s word. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit!

Benediction: May God, the creator, bless you. May the loving grace of Jesus, our redeemer, be a fence around you. And may the empowering presence of the holy spirit keep you until we meet again. Go in peace.

