

Surprise!

When I was a kid, one of my favorite things to do was climbing trees. Maybe my parents were surprised that their daughter wasn't more ladylike. But our home had woods all around it, so there were plenty of trees to climb. Amid the branches of a friendly tree, way up above the earth, I could look at the world from a different perspective. Could think my own thoughts and dream my own dreams. I could travel to the make-believe world of Neverland, and sail high in the crow's nest of Captain Hook's pirate ship in my favorite story, *Peter Pan*. In the Neverland, I could be one of the lost children who wanted to never grow up. Children who sing a song that goes like this: *If growing up means it would be / beneath my dignity to climb a tree, / I'll never grow up, never grow up / never grow up!*

You know, maybe there's a kernel of truth in that little song. Because today in Luke's Gospel we hear about a grown-up for whom it *is* beneath his dignity to climb a tree. It's also beneath his dignity to run. In his first-century culture, grown men do not run.

Either running *or* climbing a tree would be unheard of for someone in the position Zacchaeus holds. See, Zacchaeus—let’s call him Zack, for short—is a big shot in the city. He’s the head tax collector. The CEO of the Jericho office of the IRS. That is, the office of Imperial Roman Surcharges.

But on this day, Zack’s filled with excitement and anticipation: A traveling rabbi is passing through Jericho. And a huge crowd has already gathered along Main Street. Zack can hear the buzz as townspeople first set their eyes on this Galilean. Zack’s not a tall man, and he can’t see over their heads. And he *really* wants to get a look at this itinerant preacher, at this Jesus everybody’s talking about. So he hurries down a couple blocks—he actually *runs!* And he scrambles up into the overhanging boughs of a big old sycamore where he’ll be able to see Jesus walking by. Zack forgets all *about* his dignity. In this surprising narrative, that’s the first surprise.

But there’s more. Here comes Jesus, and he isn’t moving right past Zack up there on his perch. Jesus is stopping. He’s looking up through the leafy branches. And he’s speaking—not to his disciples, but to Zack himself! Zack thought he was just

going to get to watch Jesus pass by. He's surprised to receive much more from Jesus than he'd ever hoped for.

You and I are surprised, too. Just when we think we have Jesus all figured out, we discover that we don't. It seems odd that Jesus would seek out someone like Zack. The thing is, Zack is a man of wealth. And all through Luke's Gospel, we've been hearing about the pitfalls of wealth and riches.

Remember the guy who had so much *stuff* that he was making plans to build more barns to store it all? Well, he passed away that very same night. Remember the rich man who wouldn't help poor Lazarus? That rich man died, too, and you know where *he* ended up. Remember the rich ruler who, sadly, could not bear to give up his possessions so that he could follow Jesus? That's when Jesus observes that it's *easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God*.

So you wouldn't think Zack stands much of a chance with Jesus, would you? You wouldn't think Jesus would give him the time of day, would you? But here Jesus is, in Zack's home town. Here's Jesus in Jericho. What's he *doing* here?

We know that Jesus is journeying from Galilee to Jerusalem. Now Jericho is almost due east of Jerusalem. Jericho is *so* not on Jesus' way to Jerusalem. He's gone out of his way. He's made a detour to visit the prosperous city of Jericho. He's here for a reason.

Jesus has come to seek out a tax collector. And not just *any* tax collector—the head honcho. The one who runs the whole lucrative Jericho operation for the Roman oppressors. You know what first-century tax collectors do: They overcharge their own people, give Caesar his due, then pocket the difference.

Well. Zack the tax-man in chief has had all the assistant tax collectors reporting to him and paying him off. He's filthy rich. Stinking rich! Up to his eyeballs in corruption. Not only has he collaborated with the enemy; he's cheated everyone in town. And is detested by everyone in town. He's an object of scorn.

So when Jericho folk hear that Jesus will *honor* Zack by being a guest at his house, they're surprised. And not pleasantly so. There's more than a little righteous indignation happening here. They grouse. They gripe. *This rabbi's going to the home of a notorious sinner. He's going to share table fellowship with a*

sleazy tax collector. What can he be thinking, getting all chummy and cozy with this little crook?

For Jesus has said: *Hurry up and get down out of that tree, Zack. Because I'm coming to your house today.* So surprised is Zack, he almost *falls* out of the tree! But he's filled with a joy greater than any he's ever known. And right then, right there, this man who's been driven by greed—this man who has conned and defrauded and ripped off and swindled—this grinchy Zacchaeus turns and repents and is transformed into the most generous of givers! Both Jesus and the Jericho crowd hear Zack promise to make restitution far beyond what the law requires, *and* to give a great deal of money to the poor. Along with the crowd, you and I are surprised. Astonished! What a radical difference encountering Jesus Christ made in the life of a long-ago tax collector.

But what can you and I take away from this account in Luke's Gospel?

My brothers and sisters, the story of Zacchaeus places before us our need to recognize that we have a human inclination to murmur and grumble just like those citizens of Jericho. We who are the church—we who have been the church

for a good while—we who consider ourselves pretty tight with Jesus—we have a tendency to be surprised about some of the people who receive the grace of Christ. Why is our Jesus hanging out with the likes of *them*? That's not what we expect. We expect Christ to love and care for those who deserve it—not those who don't. And we want to be the ones who get to decide who is deserving and who is not. Sometimes we forget that if it's deserved, it's not grace. Sometimes we have trouble processing the truth that God's love and grace are for *all*.

Grace is a gift. It's not your doing or my doing. Zacchaeus is curious about Jesus. He wants to catch a brief glimpse of Jesus. But he doesn't *go* to Jesus. Jesus comes to him.

And Jesus comes to you. Enters *your* world. You don't sign up to follow Jesus. Jesus chooses *you*. And surprises you with his grace. Grace you receive. Grace to which you respond in repentance. And with joy when you hear the blessed words Zacchaeus hears: *Today salvation has come to you*.

We need saving. Isn't that what we yearn for? Isn't that what we pray for?

Beloved, we stand in the tradition of John Wesley, who teaches that salvation is an ongoing process. You *have been*

saved. You *are being* saved. You *will be* saved. You have a Savior, and your salvation is in him. In this life. Here and now. Not on a far-off someday. Today! In each saving encounter with Jesus Christ.

For after encountering Christ, you're no longer the same. You're never again the same. There's a change. A dramatic change. A diametrical change. Just as there was in Zacchaeus. You're transformed. Made into a new creation. Made into a part of God's new creation.

Enfolded into the reign of this God we worship and serve. In the kingdom of this God who is still full of surprises, all things become possible. It becomes possible for a camel to fit through the eye of a needle. It becomes possible for undeserving sinners to share a meal with the One who offers limitless forgiveness and redeeming love.

In the kingdom of this surprising Lord, it's possible for silly lost sheep to be found. It's possible for tiny lost coins to be found. It's possible for prodigal lost sons and daughters to be found.

And just in case we still don't get it, we've learned today that it's even possible for a small, despised tax man—for a lost

tax collector—to have salvation come to him. That’s why God in Christ Jesus has come to us: to seek out and to find and to save the lost. Every lost one of us!

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.