

When you were listening to this story, I wonder what you heard.

Maybe you could almost hear Zacchaeus, out of breath as he runs ahead of the crowd to see Jesus passing by. Maybe you could hear the treetop shaking and branches creaking as he hurriedly climbed up the branches.

Maybe all you could hear was the familiar children's tune, "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he."

Or, maybe you heard echoes of last week's sermon, when we talked about Jesus' parable of the pharisee and the tax collector. Maybe you're remembering how tax collectors in those days took people's hard-earned money and sent it off to a foreign, uncaring, and oppressive government. If you do, you get extra brownie points.

From the perspective of the religious, tax collectors were sinners and outsiders. And clearly Zacchaeus is no exception. After all, not only is Zacchaeus a tax collector, he is the chief tax collector. The biggest sinner.

Zacchaeus heard that Jesus is passing through the city of Jericho and went to great lengths to see him, to be in his presence.

Zacchaeus was short of stature, so he couldn't see above the crowds who gathered to meet Jesus as he passed by. Maybe it was because he was short that the crowd didn't notice his excited attempts to see Jesus. Maybe they didn't pay him much attention—or outright ignored him—unless he was knocking on their doors looking for taxes. Or maybe they did notice him, and blocked his view as a passive aggressive retaliation for unfair tax assessments.

Either way, Zacchaeus wasn't going to let anything stop him from seeing Jesus. Not only does he run ahead to get around the crowds, he makes a spectacle of himself by climbing a nearby sycamore tree. But Zacchaeus doesn't care about looking foolish. He wasn't thinking of appearances, he was thinking about Jesus. Zacchaeus is curious. He just wanted to see Jesus. He is persistent.

And as a result of this curiosity and persistence, **Jesus sees** Zacchaeus—it's hard to miss a tax collector in a tree. Now, Zacchaeus hears Jesus calling his name—"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

But the crowd is persistent as well. When they can't physically keep Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus—and Jesus from seeing Zacchaeus—they begin to grumble. Can you hear them subtly trying to warn Jesus about who's house he is headed to?

"Can you believe it? Jesus wants to go to the house of the chief tax collector! Why would he want to stay in the house of a sinner?"

It is easy to hear the words of the crowd and come to the same conclusion about Zacchaeus that they do. It is easy to label him as one who needs to repent, one in need of mercy.

Jesus, In the midst of this crowd of his admirers, refuses to stand by them. Instead, he stands by the one that society has outcast, rejected, and ignored. Jesus accepts Zacchaeus for who

he is. And so he invites himself into the tax-collector's home and life. Over the grumbling of the crowd, Zacchaeus hears that Jesus wants to spend time with him.

And in response, we hear Zacchaeus saying that he is giving half of his possessions to the poor and will repay fourfold if he has defrauded anyone. The crowd may have thought to themselves, "Here is the perfect example of a penitent tax collector. Here is one who needs to repent and has. Here is one in need of mercy."

Last week, the tax collector we talked about experienced justification—he needed mercy and asked for it—and God showed him mercy. And this week, the crowd has confused Zacchaeus with the tax collector from Jesus' parable.

The crowd was not listening to Zacchaeus and missed something important. Did you hear it? Zacchaeus doesn't ask for mercy. Instead, he says, "If."

If.

He says to Jesus, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much."

If he has defrauded anyone, he will repay them fourfold. Look, he is already giving half of all he has to the poor. This generosity is not something he will show in the future, but something he's already doing.

Grace is already present in his life. The tax collector we meet today is already living in right relationship with God, nowhere in the story does it say that Zacchaeus was dishonest, he acts with honesty and integrity, he is living into his salvation. But he hasn't started following.

He is still curious. He is curious about how to live in right relationship with God. He already knows that one step on the path toward right relationship with God involves recognizing that the gifts we have come from God and are to be used to serve God's glory. He uses his money, not to make himself "great" but to support those living in poverty because he is already a child of God.

Now the crowd is paying attention, they want to hear what Jesus will do next. And again they are in for a shock. Jesus acknowledges Zacchaeus as a child of God. And Zacchaeus hears.

This would have come as a shock to the crowd because they never took the time to get to know Zacchaeus—to spend time with him long enough to hear what he had to say. It was easier to live according to their assumptions and their prejudices.

Jesus shows us how to respond to those who are rejected. Those who are seen as outsiders. Those who are avoided and ignored. We eat dinner with them. We enter into their lives, leaving behind our assumptions and our prejudice—not as saviors bringing condemnation or judgment, but as guests willing to share a table.

Jesus shows Zacchaeus grace. He defends him as a good Jew, a person of faith, not a sinner. Not because Zacchaeus repents—he has no need to. Instead, Jesus has acknowledged him. And as a result of this grace, a person who has been rejected and despised can be seen from

the perspective of God. This isn't just the chief tax collector. This isn't a sinner. This is a person of generosity who will go to great lengths—or heights—to be in the presence of Jesus. Zacchaeus is a child of God. And so the crowd hears Jesus proclaim that salvation has come to Zacchaeus' house.

You see, salvation is more than the forgiveness of sins. It is everything we experience in our life of faith. When he heard his name, Zacchaeus knew that he could no longer be an observer sitting on the sidelines or up in a tree, watching what God is doing in the world from a safe distance. In the case of Zacchaeus, salvation is responding to the calling of Christ to follow.

That's how Zacchaeus shows us we can change the world—by entering into right relationship with God, ourselves, our neighbors, and all of creation. Starting with the recognition that no matter what our assumptions are about ourselves or our neighbors, we are children of God. We can run past those obstacles that prevent us from experiencing the presence of God. We can climb above the negative voices that keep us from hearing God's calling. We can discover who we are when we hurry to the presence of Christ. We can follow with generosity and integrity.

And so when I listen to the story of Zacchaeus, I hear how God is seeking us today. God is always calling out to us, calling us to experience grace. Our lives will be forever changed because we will have heard God calling. And the more we respond to God's calling in our lives, the more we grow in our relationship with God. The more we grow in relationship with God, the more our actions reflect God's love. We act with generosity and integrity. We hear God's voice and follow where it leads us.

So if you are curious about growing in your relationship with God, take a moment to listen. If you do, I have a feeling that you might hear God calling you. Hurry. Come down. Because I AM staying at your house today.