

At first read, this appears to be a quite a simple story, except it's anything but simple. In fact, there's actually a lot of tension throughout.

We're told at the outset that Zacchaeus is rich by virtue of being the chief tax collector (in other words that he was the worst of the shakedown men). You may know that in those days, tax collectors did door to door collecting taxes, but they could demand whatever they wanted and keep the extra money they extorted. We also learn that he was trying to see Jesus, but that he couldn't because he was short in stature. We know immediately that, by nature of his job, the regular folks in the crowd don't like him and that he's dealing with a physical limitation that may keep him from his goal of seeing Jesus.

There are several things in the parable that make Zacchaeus commendable. First, he doesn't let his physical limitation stop him from reaching his goal. This is a lesson we can all apply in our own lives, whatever the limitation—or perceived limitation. (You're not tall enough, smart enough, wealthy enough, educated enough.) If you want to be amazed by people overcoming limitation, Google physicist Steven Hawking or artist Chuck Close, both of whom have done amazing work after being paralyzed.

Zacchaeus was looking for Jesus. He knew that the crowd didn't like him and he could have assumed that the crowd's hero, Jesus, wouldn't like him either. But instead of letting shame or guilt keep him home, he deliberately went to see Jesus. And the amazing thing is that when you look for Jesus, you will find him because Jesus always has his eye on you. When you see Christ, Christ sees you.

Jesus had no reason to look up that day. What happened? Did a branch fall to the ground? Were townspeople grumbling that Zach was casting a shadow over them? Or is it that Jesus was specifically looking for something out of place? Every time I go to the beach, I bring a plastic bag with me to collect debris....plastic, rope, balloons, lobster bands..... Among all of the seaweed and driftwood, I can quickly and easily spot something that is not like the others. Jesus said he was looking for the lost. Is that why he saw Zacchaeus?

This is the best part of the story! Three things happen in rapid succession. First, Jesus sees him and calls him by name. (By the way, the name Zacchaeus means 'clean and pure'. That may have been an aspirational name for a man who was regarded at the time as a thug, but he lives into it!)

Jesus then says, 'Get down here. I'm staying with you tonight.' Can you imagine—even just a little? What would it be like if John Wayne or Princess Diana or Tom Brady came to York? You might think they're staying at the Cliff House or York Harbor Inn, but they say, 'I hope you have a guest room, because I'm staying with you!' Jesus is more than a pop culture celebrity. He is God With Us. Here's another remarkable thing in the passage: Instead of being paralyzed with fear of judgement by Jesus, 'he hurried down and was happy to welcome him'.

What's the crowd's reaction to this event? They grumble. They're not happy. They're judging Jesus by His actions and they're judging Zacchaeus. Can't you almost hear them? “We're the upright citizens. He should be talking to us!” “Are you kidding me? This isn't fair! He's talking to that creep Zacchaeus! What?! He's staying with him tonight!! I don't know about this Jesus guy...” “This doesn't seem fair...”

Here's something you'd miss if you're just reading this passage out of the context of it's setting. Right before this, at the end of chapter 18, Jesus has cured a blind man and the crowd has cheered him on. The crowd is the culture. We've learned that the blind man's faith has made him well. Remember Zacchaeus has gone to great lengths to see Jesus. He, too, has faith. And it's ultimately his faith that makes him well by having him change his ways. By extension, this makes the community healthier, too. The irony here is that the crowd cheers Jesus for healing a blind man, but in the very next passage, this one, they're the ones who can't see Christ's transformative power.

Jesus was honoring Zacchaeus with his presence, but also teaching by example. Jesus taught the crowd not to judge by appearances. When God comes to town, things change. People's paths change when they learn The Way.

Jesus also taught Zacchaeus by example. He expected to spend time with him. And just that nod was enough to completely transform Zacchaeus. He says, right then and there, "I'm sharing what I have and if I've taken anything fraudulently, I'll give back more than I took". When Jesus comes into your life, you are inspired to be better than you've been.

Your holy homework this week is to look for Jesus and bring him into you home. Blessed be and amen.