

The Perspective of the Sycamore Tree

Luke 19:1-10

August 20, 2017

I used to love to climb trees. I'm sure it terrified my mother, but it thrilled me. Under the right circumstances, I'd still climb a tree. Of course now I'd terrify David. Interestingly, in a 2011 survey by Planet Ark, children were found to more likely injure themselves falling out of bed than falling out of a tree. But then fewer than 20 percent of children climb trees.

There is something about a tree which calls to the primal in me, maybe in you, too. Is it the safety it confers from predator land creatures? Or perhaps an instinct that enfolded in the high branches one finds the sweetest fruit? I wonder if it's the innate desire to fly? Or the joyful pleasure of a wider and further view gained by a higher perch? This much I'm sure of: perspective changes when one is up in a tree.

Perspectives. We all hold them. Much of the time, firmly. So firmly we create ruts. Sometimes those comfort zones affirm healthy habits, but sometimes they protect addictive behaviors. Sometimes those comfort zones are intentional and useful, but sometimes they are subconscious and destructive. If we never get out of our comfort zones, nothing changes. We're rooted in a rut.

Poet James Broughton writes:

Experience life don't deplore it

Shake hands with time

Don't kill it.

Open a lookout

Dance on a brink

Run with your wildfire

You are closer to glory leaping an abyss than upholstering a rut.

Zaccheus is in a rut and he is beginning to realize he doesn't like it there. What's his rut? He's a Jewish man working for the Roman occupiers as a tax collector. He's sold out; he has a job; he gets a salary and the benefits – easy bribes and petty theft among them -- but by his work, at his hand, his fellow Jews, (most of whom are dirt poor subsistent laborers) pay exorbitant taxes. Some end up slaves if they can't pay them. As a Jew, he's colluding with the enemy.

Zaccheus' peers hate him. He is shunned. Despised. Lonely. He has money—plenty of it; he has no friends. He has things; he has no love. The community labels him a sinner. Can you feel the tension? I imagine that there is something inside of him that feels unsettled, incongruent, guilty.

Zaccheus is in a rut. He wonders about a change, but how? It's difficult to get out of a rut, especially a silk-lined gold appointed one.

He decides to see what this Jesus is all about.

Is he simply curious about what this man everyone's talking about looks like?

To see if he has a halo or glows? To get a wave? A kiss? A blessing?

What would seeing Jesus – not even meeting him -- do? I imagine there is a vague "something" wiggling around in him that senses that this itinerant teacher/healer/prophet could be a compelling antidote. Maybe he thought seeing Jesus would help him get out of his rut, freshen his perspective.

What do people expect who line a parade route waiting for the President's or the Pope's motorcade?

Zaccheus is short. No hope of seeing Jesus through the 5 deep crowd lining the streets. He finds a lookout. Decides to leap across the abyss of his brokenness, and up the branches of a tree instead of upholstering his rut. He chooses a sycamore tree, a type of fig tree with low widely spreading branches. An easy one to climb, even for a vertically challenged sandal clad grown man in a full length robe. (Even for a middle aged woman!) But grown men don't climb trees. Imagine the looks. He's noticed. Not just by the crowds.

Jesus finds Zaccheus up in that tree. Yes, Jesus sees Zaccheus. We think Zaccheus was desperate to find Jesus, but Jesus is also desperate -- to find lonely, seeking folks like Zaccheus.

He's barely had time to register that Jesus has approached when he hears his name: Jesus telling him to hurry up, that he's going to be hosting him for dinner. Jesus has a perspective on Zaccheus which eclipses everything he believes about himself and about Jesus. He's wearing the label "Sinner" but to Jesus he is still somebody. Worthy to be seen. Heard. Socialized with.

In JesusWorld, no one is rejected. No one is hated. No one with a differing opinion is run down on the side of the road.

That's some perspective!

But the crowds, the ones who despised Zaccheus for his role, and maybe for his theft, are grumbling and hurt. Jesus, this rabbi, this teacher, this healer, this peasant is choosing to spend the afternoon with a Sinner?

The crowd had their perspective too. Write someone off, label them, critique them before you get the facts. Judge.

The "crowd" has gotten nowhere by labeling and shunning Zaccheus—no happier, no wealthier, no freer.

Perspective. In the First Century there were a variety of perspectives about people, groups, civility, government, religion. Who was a sinner? Who was honorable? Some were fringy. Some mainstream.

Perspectives arising out of political beliefs, family or ethnic convictions, cultural norms, religious tenets.

Perspective. Today there are a variety of perspectives about people. Groups. Civility. Government. Religion. Perspectives about who is right. Who is wrong. Some are fringy. Some mainstream. Some arise out of political beliefs, family or ethnic convictions. Cultural norms. Ideologies.

What perspectives guide your behavior? Your beliefs? Are those perspectives sometimes in tension? Conflict?

The Jesus Perspective is grounded in Love. Nonviolence. Peace. Kindness. Mercy. Fairness/Justice. Truth.

We hear it when Jesus claims that even the last wayward sheep is worthy to risk a life for in finding.

We observe it when Jesus forgives the woman found in adultery.

We see it when Jesus offers grace to the dying thief on the cross.

We are shocked by it when Jesus absorbs violence which places him on the cross.

We find it when Jesus seeks out the turn-coat, sleazy Zaccheus.

The Jesus Perspective has invited Zaccheus' transformation, which is manifest in generosity. Because of that Jesus Perspective now alive in Zaccheus, everyone benefits. The cheated ones are refunded. Risking Zaccheus has found a new perspective in his sycamore tree. Win-Win.

And that radical counterintuitive Jesus Perspective surprises: then, now.

God does not ignore those who today are racist, anti-Semitic, white supremacist, neo-Nazi, or ISIS or domestic terrorists. God doesn't write off those who disagree with God's desire for us to "love one another." If anyone—hearty sinners or self-righteous accusers -- climbs a tree searching for a new and life-giving perspective, Jesus (if he can find any of his followers) will invite himself over for a chat over wine and bread, or beer and pretzels. Not to affirm hatred, judgment, violence, but to introduce them to a still better way.

This is the Jesus Perspective: But let there be no mistake:

There is no place among Jesus-loving people

whether black,

white or brown,

immigrant or native,

peon or president

for racism, white supremacy, anti-Semitic belief or rhetoric or violence.

These are Sin. Evil.

They represent the wrong trajectory for Christians,

for leaders, for patriots of this country or any country.

The church, through the voice of Christ, has a humble responsibility to name evil, oppose divisive rhetoric and speak out against violence AND at the same time pray that those whose mantra is hate and violence have courage to climb a tree and open themselves to the Jesus Perspective of respect, nonviolence, humility, acceptance, love. They, we, all of us, like Zaccheus, (in Jesus' words), can be saved.

Yes, saved. "Salvation has come to this house today," Jesus (whose name means salvation) says. No, not in the way that these words have come to be used for "getting into heaven", but saved as in
being rescued from enemies;
returning home after being exiled;
being healed with "salve" after a sickness;
having one's sins forgiven in the temple,
in reestablishing relationship with God.
Saved by adopting the Jesus Perspective.

Recently on the NPR Saturday afternoon program *Snap Judgment*, I heard a rerun of a program from 2009. I believe we need a story like this after a week like this.

Rabbi Weissner and his wife moved from New York City to Nebraska. On moving day, they began to receive anti-Jewish, pro KKK abusive phone calls with words like: "you'll be sorry you moved into that house." Mailings of racist, anti-Semitic literature followed. The Rabbi made a police report. Police said they thought the harasser was Larry Trapp—a vocal member of the Ku Klux Klan.

Calls kept coming on the Rabbi's answering machine. So the Rabbi started calling back, leaving messages on Larry's machine every day at 3 pm, just before his bar mitzvah students came for study. He'd say,

"Larry, there's a lot of love out here what's wrong with you?"

“Why do you love the Nazi’s so much? They would have killed you.” (Larry was disabled, confined to a wheel chair.)

One day he left the message, “I’ve heard you are disabled and I wondered if I could take you to the grocery store?”

He kept calling.

Finally, one Saturday evening, Larry picked up the phone. “Is this the Rabbi?” “Yes, what can I do for you?” replied Rabbi Weisser.

Larry was lifting himself out of his rut and hoisting himself into his very own tree.

“This is Larry. I want to get out of this hatred I’m living and I don’t know how.” The Rabbi said, “Would you like me to come over and to talk?”

“Yes,” said Larry. So against the wishes of his children, (if a Nazi invites you over for dinner he wants you for dinner) he and his wife went over.

They were met at the door by wheel chair bound Larry with three guns at his disposal, but the Rabbi reached out his hand, Larry took it, and he began to weep.

Then he took off his swastika rings, gave them to Rabbi Weiser saying, “Take these away. They’ve caused me nothing but trouble all my life” and began talking with the Rabbi about his childhood, his father’s beatings, and how he grew up in an atmosphere of hatred and abuse and bigotry. He had tried his whole life to make himself acceptable to his father and had achieved Grand Dragon status of the Nebraska KKK. Now he was determined to live a different way. In the nine remaining months of his life, during which time the Rabbi invited him to live with them, Larry did a lot of work to make amends. He spoke out in schools against racism, and even converted to Judaism. He became a better person in death than he had been in his life. Until Rabbi Weiser’s persistent caring calls, he hadn’t known a perspective other than one of hate, anger, bigotry.

I'm convicted by this story. This, yes, true story. Look it up. Like a rabbi 2000 years earlier, this man didn't cower in fear, or passively stand by while hostility encircled him and his family. He acted. In love. To counter an evil force.

It's a rare person of any faith who holds the courage, conviction and persistence of Rabbi Weisser. I thank God for people like him, and pray that in such times as these, God might raise up more saints who look up in a tree at someone perched at the point of conversion to that better way and say, "Come on down . . . I'm coming to your house today."