

**Rev. Mike Cole**  
**Providence Presbyterian Church**  
**Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time**  
**All Saints Sunday**  
**November 2, 2025**

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; **Luke 19:1-10**

**"Up a Tree"**

I'd like to take you back to your childhood Sunday School days and see if you remember a little Bible song. Sing it with me if you remember it: "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see."

As a result of that song, we remember Zacchaeus. But what do we remember about him? He was short. We don't remember anything else about him except his stature. That's hardly the kind of epitaph any of us would want. And yet, that's about all we remember of Zacchaeus.

But when we listen to Luke's account of the encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, we learn a number of other interesting details that the Bible song doesn't teach us. Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector, the head vulture that feasted on the dying Israelite culture. Tax collectors were given a quota of taxes to collect for Rome in any way they could. In addition, anything extra they collected was theirs to keep (their commission). The ruthlessness of tax collectors did not exactly endear them to the populace. To be the chief government gouger was to be the most despised man in the community.

This is important information because it makes what Zacchaeus did all the more astonishing. Something must have been happening within Zacchaeus - something which no one else saw because they wouldn't have expected it in the first place. We're pretty good at "pigeon-holing" people, aren't we? We get someone sized up and figured out, and then we put them in a slot that says, "trouble-maker," "greedy," "jealous," "uneducated," "gossip," or any one of a thousand other labels we use to box people in.

Zacchaeus was an outsider, an outcast who was never included in people's lives. He was never invited over for dinner, never asked to attend bar-mitzvahs, and never welcome at anniversaries or birthdays. He was wealthy, but what good is wealth if it enriches no one but ourselves? His choice of a profession made him a recluse, a Scrooge, a surly and bitter man.

Knowing all this, it's pretty hard to feel sorry for Zacchaeus except that there is something pathetic about watching him climb into a Middle-Eastern sycamore, which is more akin to our fig tree than the sycamore we know. Maybe he picked this particular tree because it was one his short, stubby, legs could negotiate. Or perhaps he chose it because its foliage would hide him from view. Zacchaeus, hanging on to scrawny branches, batting away broad leaves which obscured his view, and enduring fruit stains on his expensive robes, presents a ridiculous picture of a man up a tree.

Why would a man who was already despised subject himself to the ridicule and "cat calls" which surely would accompany the sight of him perched in a fig tree? Jesus had, and still has that effect on people who yearn for something more in life, who long to come off the sidelines and get into the celebration of life, who are tired of being nothing more than spectators.

Curiosity alone was not enough to lure Zacchaeus up a tree. It must have been like those times when we are casting about, searching for answers, or at least better questions, and we are drawn inexplicably into a church or a Bible study where aid and comfort are given. Zacchaeus probably felt safe in his perch on the sidelines because he figured that what Jesus was doing and saying certainly didn't apply to him.

Many people go through life a little like Zacchaeus, figuring that the good news Jesus brings is somehow for everyone but them. But the reason that Zacchaeus was up a tree in the first place, risking ridicule, was something that may have been quite incomprehensible to him. What swept Zacchaeus up a tree was the stirrings of faith, which had lain dormant awaiting the right combination of love and forgiveness to spring to life. What Zacchaeus discovered up a tree was that what Jesus did and said did apply to him personally.

He probably thought that he was pretty well hidden from view, until some little kid caught sight of him and began to point and laugh. Soon the whole crowd joined in making fun of Zacchaeus: "What 'cha doing in there Zack? Making fig newtons?" "I always wondered where you fig-ured our taxes." "I always said that someone would have to be out of their tree to be a tax collector, but I guess I was wrong, they have to be up a tree."

I'm sure that Zacchaeus must have regretted his decision to follow his heart up a tree. But by then it was too late. So he just covered in his cover as he awaited the arrival of Jesus. All he wanted was to get a glimpse of the man. He didn't plan on a personal encounter (all of which is instructive for those who only want to see Jesus from afar). The crowd made Zacchaeus nervous and he began to shake and quiver in the tree setting off a curious rustling sound which attracted Jesus' attention.

Stopping beside the tree, Jesus reached into the tree, parted the branches and found himself staring into the wizened face of Zacchaeus. Jesus found Zacchaeus in his hiding place, just like he finds us in ours. With Jesus, there is no such thing as being a spectator. That's what Zacchaeus learned up a tree that day. He could be caught up in the promises and wonders of Jesus. Zacchaeus, the jaded, corrupt, greedy guy who gouged taxes from everyone, could be embraced by the joy and awesome hope which Jesus brings to those who let themselves be touched by him.

The story of Zacchaeus is the story of a man who thought he could remain on the uncommitted fringe of life, but who found that he must become a character in Jesus' story, as all his followers must. In being found by Jesus he is in fact saved, rescued from being trapped by who and what he had become, rescued from his solitude, rescued from the tree to join the celebration of life.

But the story wouldn't have ended with good news unless Zacchaeus had been willing to climb down out of his tree, to endure the humiliation of the people's laughter and scorn, and respond to Jesus' invitation. In short, Zacchaeus responded by opening himself to Jesus, making himself vulnerable. It was the act of vulnerability that brought Zacchaeus from the periphery of the story of Jesus to its heart, from being an observer of the gospel to being a recipient of the gospel, from watching Jesus change others, to being changed himself.

Like Zacchaeus, many times we banish ourselves to the sidelines of the Christian story, even when we have been lively participants in it for many years. "What a wonderful story it is," we tell ourselves. "But we've had our time in the celebration. We've done our part. Now it's time for us to climb back into our tree on the sideline and nod approvingly as others join Jesus' story." That's partly what happened with me. When I retired eight years ago, I thought that meant I was retired from ministry. But none of us get to retire from ministry – we get retained for ministry.

Now maybe you know something about the story I don't. But I didn't notice Jesus telling anyone in the crowd that they could trade places with Zacchaeus on the sideline. He didn't take James, Peter, or John, who had served with him the longest, and tell them it was time to head for the sidelines.

No, Jesus is always calling us down from our tree of retreat to join his story which is in progress. Others may say, "What an amazing, mysteriously attractive saga this story is of a God who seeks a lost people by taking up residence among them. What a fascinating story with a hopeful promise of a world made new. But of course, the story, the promise, doesn't really apply to me, does it?" they say to themselves as they inch higher and higher into the tree.

They think of a lifetime of offenses to repay if they are to climb down, but they forget that their debts were paid long before they even incurred them. Most of us are immobilized by our exaggerated perceptions of our unworthiness and our limited perceptions of who Jesus is and how far God is willing to go to get us back. We want to hear Jesus' story; we want to see what new dreams God is dreaming for our world. But it is easier if we climb a tree to get a good view - a ringside seat which costs us nothing, even though it prevents us from being where the action is.

But Jesus has other plans for us. God intends for us all to be in on the celebration of life, sharing in the dreams, being caught up in a vision of a new world. Jesus passes by each tree in which a spectator has taken refuge and invites them down and himself in to their homes and their hearts.

One thing remains between us and the joy, the promise, the celebration of life in Jesus Christ. Like Zacchaeus, we have to climb down out of our tree. We have no alternative to making ourselves vulnerable. Who knows what people might say? Who knows how ridiculous we will look? Who knows what astonishing things we might do, what generosity we might discover in our hearts, what possibilities we might awaken for love, commitment, and dreaming new dreams and hoping new hopes?

Zacchaeus risked everything to gain new life. Having opened himself to Jesus, Zacchaeus pledged half of his wealth to the poor and promised to restore four times what he had cheated anyone out of. His time up a tree was over. His salvation not only made a difference in his life. It was about to make a difference in a lot of lives. His salvation had an economic impact as well as a personal one. Which is also why we are saved.

Salvation is never purely an individual matter. It always affects others - how many and in what ways is up to us. Zacchaeus responded with gratefulness and demonstrated his gratefulness by making a pledge - a promise - to Jesus. His pledge to give half of all he owned to the poor went way beyond what even the law required in the way of restitution for dishonesty.

What have we promised God lately, not just in terms of our financial pledge to the church, but also in terms of what we intend to do with our time and our talents? Are we retreating to the sidelines with our time, talents and treasure? Zacchaeus didn't retreat, and look what it meant for his community, not only in the immediate future because of his financial commitment, but also for many years to come because of his spiritual commitment. According to tradition, this "wee little man" who longed to see Jesus became the Bishop of the church at Caesarea. As Paul Harvey would say, "that's the rest of the story."

Zacchaeus climbed out of a tree, took Jesus into his home and his heart and was never the same again. And neither was his community. Jesus called Zacchaeus and continues to call us to climb down out of our tree so that he can take our place on his tree - the cross.

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

**The Charge: Wherever you go, God is sending you. Wherever you are, God will equip you. God will accomplish a purpose in your being there. Christ who dwells within you has something He wants to do through you where you are. Believe this and go in God's grace, love and power. Amen**