

A Breakthrough

“Zacchaeus was trying to see who Jesus was, but he was a short man and could not see over the crowd.” I suspect that the tax collector’s height was not the only reason he could not see Jesus. I think there is something missing from this scene; some background information that gives greater depth to this story. I am short in stature as you see, but my height has never been a barrier for me to see what I need to see. If I were in this kind of situation, I would deal with the matter; I could call out to my friends in the crowd to let me in or I could edge my way through the crowd in order to get a better view.

However, Zacchaeus did not call out to anyone, and he did not say “Excuse me” to edge his way through the crowd. He was in his own town, but acted like he was in a city full of strangers, left to fend for himself. Zacchaeus’ problem was not the physical barrier of the crowd – his problem was the mental barrier between himself and the crowd.

The people did not like Zacchaeus, not because he was rich, but because he worked for the Romans. Zacchaeus was a collaborator with the despised overlords of Israel, and he got rich skimming tax profits from his fellow Jews. Collaborators are often more despised than an invading army, because they are seen as having betrayed their own people, their own heritage. Is it any wonder, then, that Zacchaeus did not expect to be welcomed by the crowd? He may have even been afraid to enter the crowd at all, worried about anonymous blows from an angry mob.

It would be interesting if we could hear Zacchaeus talk about himself. He might say, “What’s wrong with me? You know, somebody has got to do my job. I paid the Romans for the right to collect taxes. I have worked so hard, so I deserve to be rich.” When we talk about the tax collectors in Jesus’ time, I think we need to consider an unjust society, ruled by the Roman Empire.

You might have heard the Latin phrase “Pax Romana” which could be translated “peace through Rome”. Rome’s promise was if the nations would just submit to Caesar, Rome would bring peace and prosperity to the whole world. However, Roman peace came through force and absolute domination based on an unequal society in which the Romans ruled absolutely and, as a matter of policy, recruited locals to perform the more unpleasant tasks of empire – like collecting taxes. It was better to let a Jew suffer from the discrimination of being a tax collector than to put a Roman in that position – Jews, and their feelings, were expendable. We can say that in the larger picture, Zacchaeus was also a victim of Roman peace; he did not belong to either Rome or Israel.

So when Zacchaeus heard that Jesus was passing through the town, he ran ahead and climbed the tree to see Jesus, not just because he was short, but because he lived in the margins of that community. I think he must have felt comfortable in the tree where he could make himself invisible, and could see what he wanted to see without any obstacles. I don’t think he was expecting to attract Jesus’ attention on the tree or to be spotlighted before the crowd. So it was probably a surprise for him to be found, and even to be called by his name.

Jesus said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today”. It was a backwards sort of invitation, to demand hospitality like that, but Zacchaeus would never have asked Jesus to come to his house – because he knew, or thought he knew, that a tax collector’s invitation would only be laughed at. But Jesus invited him – and that moment of invitation changed his life. Zacchaeus hurried down and was happy to welcome Jesus. Jesus knew what Zacchaeus was looking for; he wanted to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance - basic human needs.

Notice the encounter between the two people. There was no barrier between them; there was no prejudice, no assumptions, no criticism toward Zacchaeus, and there was no hesitation, but joy and welcome toward Jesus. In this very genuine encounter, something happened to both of them. Zacchaeus was changed. He said “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” And

Jesus gained Zacchaeus' trust. On the contrary to this, all who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Even though the crowd were curious about Jesus, were listening to what he was talking about while they were following him, they did not have such an encounter with him as Zacchaeus did.

What makes the encounter between those two people different and unique? I think the difference is the personal and direct invitation from Christ. Jesus did not ask for volunteers, saying "is there anyone who'd like to host a dinner for me?" And Jesus did not say to him indirectly. "Wouldn't it be nice if you welcome me to your house?" Instead Jesus told him personally and directly "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I *must* stay at your house today". This is an imperative. But I don't think it sounds strict; it sounds like an old friend who really understands who he is and what he is looking for. This powerful invitation was a breakthrough for Zacchaeus to overcome all the barriers that kept him from belonging to any groups. He probably had few friends, and even fewer people who wanted to be seen in his company. But with one particular invitation, his sense of belonging, his encounter with God and a transformation of his life happened all at once.

No matter how different we are, we all have something in common in our hearts. And maybe that is also true between Zacchaeus and us. You have climbed up trees in your life, seeking to belong somewhere, to find meaning in your life and hoping to change yourself. And you are still climbing up the trees on Sunday mornings, sitting in the pews, praising God, praying to God, listening to the Word of God, greeting and serving others and sharing your gifts in various ministries.

I'd like to remind you that it is God who sees you, and that God knows what the deepest desires of your hearts are: to see and to be seen, to love and to be loved, and to touch and to be touched. Can you hear what God is saying to you? 'My beloved, I must stay with you forever, welcome me as I welcome you.' This is an everyday invitation to you, and this is a breakthrough for all of us to explore something new that we never experienced before. May we say "yes" right away to that invitation to walk with God every day.