



When Your Up A Tree – Touchpoint for October 29, 2025

Luke 18:9-14 (NRSVUE)

¹Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. ²There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. ³He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way—he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. ⁴So, he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by. ⁵When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home." ⁶Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. ⁷Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, "What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?" ⁸Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, "Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages." ⁹Jesus said, "Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is Zacchaeus, son of Abraham!" ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost."

Grace to you from the Mystery in whom we live and breathe and have our being.

"Today is salvation day in this home!"

Let's not make this a bible lesson about the traitorous, rapacious behaviors of tax collectors at that time or sing a silly song ridiculing a man's height as being wee? Let's get to the heart of the matter.

Jericho was a wealthy and important town. This made it one of the more heavily taxed cities. Jericho was referred to as The Divine City." Known for its rose gardens and renowned balsam groves, Jericho was situated at the approach to Jerusalem and the river crossings into other lands.

Jesus was going through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. Zaccheus was in Jericho on his tax collecting route.

Jesus, a man known for dining with tax collectors was collecting a crowd. They were watching Jesus. Perfect distraction for Zaccheus to run ahead and inconspicuously climb a tree to get a better look at the man his co-workers had been talking about.

Why would anyone who is known for extortion and greedy meander through a crowd to catch a glimpse of one person? Simple curiosity would not be worthy of the potential for violent retaliation. Zaccheus was determined to see the one who his fellow tax collectors claimed did not judge them but ate with them.

Jesus came near the tree where Zaccheus is perched. All eyes are on Jesus. Zaccheus stares at Jesus from behind the branches. No one can see Zaccheus. As always, he lives in the emotional shadows of his reputation.

Jesus looked up and stared back at Zaccheus.

There is a Spanish word penned by St. Ignacius about the way Ignacius felt about God. The word is 'acatamiento.' Literally translated it means 'affectionate awe.' Jesus sees Zaccheus with acatamiento.

Zaccheus is called out and now exposed before the crowd.

Zaccheus was not a little man due to his stature alone. He was a little man because of his ugly behavior. He extorted. He rose to the top ranks as a notorious tax collector. He was hated by all of those standing near Jesus.

But Jesus does not look at Zaccheus with judgment, but with acatamiento.

“Hey Zaccheus. Come down!” Jesus shouts. “I’m coming to your house for dinner!”

Jesus didn’t just see him. He gave the outraged crowd the impression they were buds!

The gospel of Jesus is that we are seen. To make momentary eye contact with the person begging at an intersection, regardless of your lack of cash to give them, is what it means to see someone. It legitimizes their existence and brings life. It acknowledges their value as a person. It can breathe life into another human being.

A man who spent years in prison began working with Father Greg Boyle of Homeboy Industries and experienced this restorative love. The man said, “We were used to being watched, we were not used to being seen.” He experienced acatamiento with Father Greg and Homeboy Industries and like Zaccheus, it moved him to a different place.

To be seen is to be given life. Zaccheus had wealth but was lost in his illusion of separation from all that is good. He found himself up in a tree. The eye gaze of Jesus saw him and instantly called him into existence. Jesus legitimized his life and identity. Check out the last verse of our story.

Jesus said, “For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost.” He said “restore! Not shape shift or provide some kind of spiritual cosmetic surgery. Not invent, create or replace. Restore!

Jesus came to restore all things that belong to God. Zack belonged to God long before he came down from the tree. The acatamiento of Jesus was more than the identity he’d fashioned for himself. He now saw himself with acatamiento and he desired to make amends.

Jesus did not tell Zaccheus to get it together or to change his ways. He didn’t tell Zaccheus to pray a prayer of repentance, and he’ll become a new person.

We can never become a new person.

Evangelists and crusaders stop telling me I can be a new person if I pray the prayer! It can never happen.

Wait, I thought when we prayed the abracadabra prayer, and asked Jesus into our hearts we are being saved from hell? Weren’t we told what to believe and what to recite to enter heaven? Didn’t some say we must be baptized to belong. To be confirmed by religious authorities? Weren’t some saying Spirit comes into us when we speak a heavenly language?

Like Zaccheus, we are lost when we don’t know who we really are.

Someone once said, “To not know who I am is worse than death.”

“God’s justice is fully successful when God can legitimate and validate human beings in their original and total identity!”

As young Presbyterian adolescent I was told by the workers of an evangelistic society that I wasn’t enough. That sin separated me from God. This fed my innocent adolescent shame, and I drank the Kool-Aid.

Maybe this was never accurate at all. Those well-meaning fanatics helped create the illusion that sin separated me from God and that was the “good news” I carried to others.

To be saved from our illusions and false identities is to be restored to who we were. The person we always were but never knew.

Please don’t gloss over this. To be saved is to be liberated from whatever has attempted to define us. Be it family, friends, enemies, courts, titles, substances, religious institutions or self-loathing.

Only God gets to define us. Like Zaccheus, we are not being invited to say a pithy prayer, but rather to dine with Christ in our own homes. It’s where God is at home.

It’s the place in us where spirit awaits the awakening of our soul’s worth.

Please don’t neglect to reflect on this theme of our infinite and irrevocable belonging. Why? Because it is the subversive message of Jesus to Western Christianity that says we are not enough.

With the acatamiento of Jesus, the veil is pulled back, and all religious illusions are done away with. We never were and are not separate from God’s relentless love. We simply found ourselves lost and up a tree.

Amen

Please join us live on Wednesday. Henry will be sharing his own personal Zaccheus story.

Spirit in the Desert

Opening Song

Be Still

(London Fox Taize Choir)

Be Still, know that I am God.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Oh Lord Hear My Prayer

(The London Fox Taize Choir)

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

(Robert Stone, The Cambridge Singers, John Rutter)

Benediction

Create in Me a Clean Heart

Create in me a clean heart, oh God

And renew a right spirit within me

Create in me a clean heart, oh God

And renew a right spirit within me

AMEN