

Climbing Trees

How we try to get higher to find a God who tells us to get down.

a Homily by The Rev. Andrew Downs

Proper 26C | Luke 19:1-10

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How many of you climbed trees as a kid?

I never did. I wasn't a climber. Maybe it was my fear of heights or insecurity about upper body strength. I'm guessing it has more to do with my being a pretty chill kid than anything else.

So I didn't climb trees. But that didn't mean I didn't want to get higher up to see things.

The image of Zacchaeus climbing a tree is a bit of the theater of the absurd. It's bemused Christians for centuries and I know several of you are going to be singing a song about a wee little man all morning.

This scene is absurd. It has bit of humor. A bit of the odd. And a bit of depth to it.

And it keeps begging the question of what did he really think he was doing, climbing that tree? To see? Maybe like the blind beggar in the preceding verses who was on the outskirts of Jericho. Who kept shouting to Jesus to be healed. He wanted to see. Shouting "have mercy on me" like the tax collector's prayer from last week.

Seeing. Elevation. Being made whole again. These are feelings you and I understand, don't we? The desire to be lifted up to feel the glory of God. And to understand the great mysteries of the world.

This is the subject of the religious author Kester Brewin's new book *Getting High: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the Dream of Flight*. In it he deals with the sensation of being elevated, of getting closer to God. And the book's title comes from that sense of physically putting ourselves closer

to God in the air and space. And through mind altering states of consciousness.

There's something about elevation.

We've had several related themes the last few weeks, haven't we? About mercy. The tax collector's prayer for mercy and the beggar right before today's gospel shouts for mercy.

And these two are both trying to see. The blind man and Zacchaeus. One literally. The other perhaps to scope Jesus out. Maybe. Or maybe to see what others couldn't. Maybe that's who he is.

Money. Power. Influence. Relationships. The rich and the poor. Who we are to one another.

Seeing those distinctions. Seeing what Jesus is up to. Remember the parable of the rich man in Hades who asks Abraham to send Lazarus to bring him a drink? That was a few weeks ago.

All these are variations on a theme. About elevation and seeing.

And this absurd story about a short man climbing a tree has them all.

Who is Zacchaeus?

The NRSV says that he was short in stature. So he's traditionally been seen as a short man. But the scholar, Ched Myers writes that every other usage in the Greek Scriptures of this word is not short, but young. Perhaps he is not a wee little man, but a wee young man.

Perhaps the comedy of his elevation is less about his ability to see but about his youth. How can someone so young be chief tax collector? Nepotism? Patronage? And the man is loaded. Really rich.

Remember last week, we had the tax collector as the unlikely spiritual disciple? Greater than the best Bible scholar and spiritual guru? Because he prayed for mercy? Yeah, start thinking about Zacchaeus in that light.

Young, unmerited, richer than God, stealing from his own people.

This is the guy Jesus tells to climb down and invites himself over for dinner.

Now put him up against the rich young ruler, also skipped in the lectionary. Jesus invites him to sell all his stuff, distribute the money to the poor, and follow him. Of the two, Zacchaeus is the convert.

Remember the Sycamore?

Back a couple chapters, Jesus spoke of a faith which could uproot a sycamore and cast into the sea. The subtle idea of the time was that sycamores were like false prophets: they looked like fig trees but they never bear fruit.

Zacchaeus, elevated, trying to see Jesus, climbs into the branches of a sycamore tree, like being wrapped in the delusions of a false prophet. This is the visual symbol of his delusion. His blindness. He believes he can find God in wealth and exploitation. Everything comes so easy to him.

But like the blind beggar, his eyes are opened and he can see. Jesus calls for him to climb down, to come, take him home to dinner. Sit with him. Eat. Share. Be together at a table, not this tower of Babel. The high, false consciousness.

Get low. Where Jesus is. For the high will be brought low and the lowly raised up.

Raising Up

There's something ironic about drawing this gospel the Sunday after an Episcopal

election. When we vote to raise one of us up to be our next bishop. And we're not picking the lowliest, let me tell ya. While some of us prayed for weeks on our selection, the Rev. Jennifer Baskerville-Burrows was a clear consensus pick.

And in 6 months, we will ordain her the 11th Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis and she will receive all the tools which elevate her above us.

But when I spoke with people about her, they talked about her authenticity. I heard stories of her walk with people, her human story of being in New York on 9/11 and praying in a stairwell. I heard her humility in an interview about seeing people she thought were so much stronger than she, returning to these places of pain and tragedy.

She struck us with humility and grace and a deep love for Jesus Christ.

And the Jesus I know from the gospel, the Christ I know from my devotion is found, not in purple robes, and all these fancies we wear. But this humble walk. The sincere responding to call. To the challenge of devotion.

Because we're all a little like Zacchaeus, climbing trees to get a better look. Wanting to get closer to God or something which passes for God anyway. Pleasure. Success. Recognition. Something human and unreasonable. Something which elevates us.

Luke takes great pains to make sure we get that Jesus loves the rich and the poor alike. Because we aren't defined by our elevation. But instead he wants to help us down from those trees which don't help us see. Which don't reveal the Spirit. Wealth, bigotry, hatred.

The truth that Jesus loves Zacchaeus anyway.

In spite of his ignorance.

Did you catch his non-apology apology? He said he's giving half his stuff away. Which,

of course, is only half of what Jesus asked the rich young ruler to do. And then he says:

“**if** I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

If! Like there's a question. **If** I've defrauded anyone... Like when they say: *if I've offended anyone...* after getting called out for offending everyone.

In the ancient world, collecting moneys for a foreign power **was** defrauding. So this guy defrauded everyone. And even though he's filthy rich he couldn't pay out all the reparations he claims. And I imagine Jesus is just shaking his head and saying

Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus. Let's you and me have dinner.

We're all a work in progress.

But I'm eternally grateful for a God of love and mercy and hope. That for all my problems, God will be merciful to me, a sinner. That in all the ways I hurt other people and take advantage, I can know Christ's love.

And that all of us, tall or short, rich or poor, old or young, man or woman, white or person of color, and of all ability, gender, and orientation, we can know Christ's mercy and love.

May we be present for each other, wrapped in Christian hope unfailing. May we show the mercy of our eternal and creative Spirit of life in gratitude and respect. And may all the love in our hearts spill forth in thanksgiving for the generous spirit who keeps refilling our hearts with perpetually abundant grace. Amen.