



Climb on Down



A Sermon By
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Grace Episcopal Church
Silver Spring, Maryland

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Luke 19:1-10

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*When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him,
"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."*

Luke 19:5

Zacchaeus was a tax collector in the bustling town of Jericho, located about 15 miles east of Jerusalem. Word reached town that the young rabbi who was making all the headlines would be passing through, and this news got Zacchaeus excited with anticipation. Zacchaeus knew of Jesus, of his preaching, his teaching, his ability to heal, and he longed to see Jesus for himself. Now the opportunity was coming, and Zacchaeus could barely contain himself.

That morning, he set his alarm extra early, got out of bed full of hope, and made his way out to the road, to the place where Jesus would walk by. Zacchaeus thought he would be the first one there, but by the time he arrived, everyone in Jericho was already waiting. The crowd lined both sides of the street, with people were jostling for spots. Zacchaeus was small in stature, so he tried making his way through the crowd to find a spot upfront where he could see, but people were pushing him and elbowing him, giving him dirty looks and saying some not so nice words. It was all a bit ugly. That is when Zacchaeus noticed the sycamore tree up ahead, up toward the end of the crowd, where there were not as many people, and a lightbulb went off in his head.

Something about this scene has always captured my imagination: Zacchaeus grabbing a couple of lower limbs and hoisting himself up. I suppose it's because I have always loved climbing trees, ever since I was a little boy. The house in which I grew up had a big oak tree out back that was perfect for climbing, and I used to spend hours and hours in that tree. It was a place I could go to escape and be by myself. I felt like I could see the whole world from up in that tree. If I turned my head one way, I could see over the fence into our neighbor's yard. If I look down in front of me, I could see into the kitchen, where my Mom was always working. And, I was always the first one to know when Dad got home from work, because I could see his car turn onto our street. That oak tree was my refuge, and I loved climbing up as high as I could, to get away from it all down below.

To this day, I still climb trees, though not in the physical sense, and my guess is that is true for almost all of us. Most of us have places where we can go to have our alone time, to think, to reflect, to process what we are experiencing and try to make sense out of life. School is

not going well; we are struggling with a class; and, so we decide to stay home for a day. We have an argument with a spouse, a parent, a child, and we retreat to one room in the house. The demands of life just get to be too much; we need to relax and unplug; and, so we take a long weekend at a favorite get-away spot. We all need places like that, places that give us time to gain perspective and understanding, so we all climb trees, even now, as adults.

I have to admit: for the last few months, I have been up in a tree, specifically when it comes to the current election season. Usually, when election year rolls around, I feel like Zacchaeus on the morning Jesus hit town – full of hope and optimism. No matter how strong our union might be, there are always issues to be addressed, ways to make our nation even better, and an election year presents an opportunity to discuss important issues. But this year, the campaigning feels like the crowd on the Jericho Road – people pushing and people shoving and it's kind of an ugly mess – so, taking a cue from Zacchaeus, I climbed up a tree a few months ago.

Since then, I have avoided watching the news or reading the politics section in the newspaper. It is not just the lack of civility in the campaigning, because politics has always been a dirty, personal business. This is probably not the first time Presidential candidates refused to shake hands, or supporters called those on the opposite side all sort of horrible names. No, what has bothered me is the language campaigns have used to marginalize whole groups of people. There have been derogatory comments about Mexicans, immigrants, Muslims, people with disabilities and people of color.

More recently, there has been a lot of talk about women, including lewd remarks that are degrading to women by implying a woman's worth is based solely on physical beauty and by suggesting unwanted sexual advances, or even sexual assault, are acceptable behavior. Some have tried to dismiss such comments as "guy talk," like this is just what men do. But, this is not what men do. And, more importantly for us here this morning, this kind of language and behavior are NOT the way of Jesus. In a time when women were subjugated to very specific roles in society, Jesus broke down barriers by speaking to women and including women among his inner circle of leaders. The way of Jesus was inclusive not exclusive. It was to elevate not denigrate. It was to embrace those who were different not to push them away and cast them aside. But, this year's campaigns have not done any of that. In fact, they have done just the opposite.

It is clear many people in this country are still ambivalent about a woman's role in society, and particularly when it comes to having women in positions of leadership and power. Studies have shown that while men who are considered effective are also seen as being nice, the reverse is true for women: women who are considered effective are seen as being not nice, or in the language that is commonly used, they are a witch, or they are nasty.

I have seen this attitude for myself, as I watched my wife's career unfold, over the last twenty to thirty years. As some of you know, she works in engineering and construction, industries that are predominantly male, and as she worked her way up the corporate ladder, she often had to battle the stereotype of a strong, intelligent, successful woman. Some men did not want to listen to her. Other men dismissed her. And, there were men, plenty of men, who thought she was a witch. That is not to say all men treated her this way, because many male colleagues strongly supported her and helped advance her career, but still, she had to battle this view that effective women are not nice.

The truth is: women can be both. We have probably all worked alongside women who are incredibly nice and extremely effective. In my ordained ministry alone, I have had the privilege of working with women who are the most gifted priests I have ever known and the nicest people you would ever want to meet. So, it is incumbent upon us to say this, and to say this emphatically, so as to breakdown old stereotypes and celebrate the strength, the talent, the ability and the wisdom of women, because that, that is the way of Jesus.

You may wonder why I am saying all of this now, on this Sunday, especially since the campaigning is almost over, and the answer is: at some point, we all have to come down from our trees. We can't stay up there forever. We all climb trees for different reasons, and sitting in our perch can make us feel good for a while, but there comes a time in life when we must climb down and get our feet on the ground. Otherwise, we can watch life pass us by, without ever really being a part of it.

For Zacchaeus, that key moment came when he was finally spotted. Sitting up in the sycamore tree, happy as a clam, watching all of the commotion down below, no one saw Zacchaeus sitting there. No one noticed him in the tree, until Jesus came along, and Jesus spotted him.

We may think no one sees us, perched in our look out spot, high up in our tree. We may think we are all alone and everything is just fine, but Jesus sees us. Jesus sees us sitting there. He knows why we are up in that tree, and he is calling us down, down to live amidst the chaos and ugliness of life, because it is only there that we learn to love and forgive, to accept and to fail, to try our best to be the person God wants us to be.

You know, Zacchaeus saw Jesus from the sycamore tree, but he did not know Jesus until he climbed back down, and the same is true for all of us. So, come on down. Climb on down from your tree. Jesus is waiting for you.

Amen.