

Coming Up Short

Texts: Psalm 32: 1-7; Fry verses at end; Luke 18:35-19:10

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I remember as a little boy going to downtown Toronto to see the Santa Claus Parade. If you think Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, you'll know what I'm talking about.

It seemed like everyone in the city was there, and all of them in front of me. I had a great view of boots and legs and parka fringes.

Fortunately I was a forward thinking three year-old and I had brought my dad along with me. He lifted me up onto his shoulders and then I had a great view. Sometimes you just need to get the right perspective to be able to see everything.

That is the story with our friend Zacchaeus of Jericho today. The text tells us that he was short in stature, but he wanted to see Jesus, to find out what he was all about.

We often think of Jesus and his disciples as coming into towns as a small group of 13 people, but in reality, by this point in his ministry, Jesus was more like a celebrity surrounded by paparazzi and fans screaming for his attention. He was mobbed wherever he went, even while traveling from place to place.

In fact, Zacchaeus wasn't the first person who wanted to see Jesus that day. Earlier, on the way into Jericho where Zacchaeus lived, a blind man sitting by the side of the road had heard the crowds that were accompanying Jesus and had called out to him. Luke doesn't tell us his name, but Mark tells us that his name was Bartimaeus.

People told the blind man to shut up and leave Jesus alone, that Jesus was far too busy to bother with a blind man, but that hadn't stopped Bartimaeus. His eyes didn't work, but his voice did, and he used it at full power.

And even though he couldn't see Jesus, not because of the crowds, of course, but because he was blind, Jesus could see him. So blind Bartimaeus was brought to Jesus, and Jesus asked him what he wanted.

That's a pretty amazing question to ask a blind man. Most of us would just assume that he wanted to see and go ahead with the healing, if we could, but not Jesus. He isn't interested in what most people would want. He's interested in what this one man in front of him wants. Bartimaeus can't see Jesus, but Jesus is determined to really see Bartimaeus.

Now, no surprises here, Bartimaeus said, naturally, "I want to see", but it's important that Jesus bothered to ask him first. Jesus sees Bartimaeus on the inside as well as the outside. Then Jesus said, "Receive your sight, your faith has healed you" and suddenly Bartimaeus could see.

Bartimaeus followed Jesus praising God and the crowd that was already following Jesus started praising God, too, and on they went.

This was the crowd that was around Jesus when he came by where Zacchaeus was, this happy crowd, this crowd that had rebuked a blind man for wanting Jesus' help, this crowd that had seen something special and probably wanted to see more.

And poor Zacchaeus, well he wanted to see, too, and he couldn't see a thing. He's got eyes that work, but he's too short. All he sees are sandals and legs and the occasional toga fringes, and not much else. And unfortunately for him, he was too old to be lifted up on his father's shoulders.

Now he might have asked people to make way for him, but he was probably not well liked, and it may have been the better part of valor for him to stay away from a crowd that could turn ugly at a moment's notice, that had thought nothing of yelling at a blind man to shut up when Jesus the healer was walking by.

Zacchaeus, you see, was a tax collector for the Romans, and that made him something of a traitor. An "accidental trampling" by a seething crowd was definitely a possibility, especially since he wasn't just a tax collector but a chief tax collector, in charge of all the other tax collectors.

He was most likely collecting a kind of customs tax as Jericho was on the main road up to Jerusalem on the way from the north.

The way tax collection worked was that a wealthy person, and you had to be a wealthy person to start with to get this gig, that a wealthy person would pay the tax the Romans demanded from the territory in advance.

That meant that this wealthy person was out money at the start. He had a big incentive to collect all the taxes he possibly could to recoup his payment, and if he collected extra taxes, well he could keep those as profits and become even more wealthy.

The way it worked was that the tax collector would stop you on the road or at the city gate and demand 2% of your goods as a tax. If you didn't comply immediately, he might take 5%. And this happened at every city gate at every city on your route.

It was a shakedown industry always on the verge of violence in the same way that borrowing money from a loan shark is a shakedown industry featuring visits from Tony with brass knuckles and Guido with a baseball bat if you aren't timely in paying the interest you owe.

To most people, this tax collection thing looked a whole lot like nothing more than legalized highway robbery, and tax collectors were often lumped in with thugs and bandits. So Zacchaeus wasn't popular.

Things happen to guys like Zacchaeus, bad things, when they find themselves in the middle of a crowd that might turn into a mob.

Zacchaeus might have been short in stature, but he wasn't short on brain power, so he ran ahead to a place he knew that Jesus would pass by, and he climbed up a sycamore tree.

Sycamore trees tend to be very spread out trees, with lots of long branches coming out from the trunk close to the ground. In other words, it was a good tree for Zacchaeus to try to climb because it would have been easy to climb, even if you weren't blessed with the gift of height.

Zacchaeus could get right up in there and be covered by the leaves. Of course, he would have been quite far from Jesus if he had stayed near the trunk, so he probably scrambled out on the branches a bit to get closer to the road.

Somehow, even though Zacchaeus is hidden by the leaves, and is certainly not calling out to Jesus because a man hiding in a tree is a humiliated man if he is seen, Jesus sees Zacchaeus.

Not only does he see him, but he recognizes him. He calls him by name. “Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down from there! I have to stay at your house tonight.”

Now, the crowd probably isn’t surprised that Jesus wants to stay the night in Jericho. It was still 15 miles *up* to Jerusalem, and I do mean up. The elevation changes from 258 feet *below* sea level to 2490 feet *above* sea level, so that’s quite a climb.

But they are surprised that Jesus would stay with Zacchaeus. The crowd that rebuked the blind Bartimaeus starts grumbling again. They’re quite prepared to rebuke Jesus now! “He’s gone to be the guest of a sinner.”

In this they weren’t wrong. In fact, the rabbis regarded any house that a tax collector even *entered* as being unclean, (*Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, p. 806) so the house where the tax collector *lived* was a very unclean house indeed.

And Jesus has just said, explicitly, that he’s going to Zacchaeus’ house. He’s going to make himself unclean with this act, and how can he claim to be a holy man if he purposely makes himself unclean? The crowd has reason to grumble.

But being seen by Jesus has already changed Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus just wanted to see Jesus as people want to see a passing celebrity, but when Jesus saw him, everything was changed, Zacchaeus was changed.

He may have been a sinner when Jesus started for his house, but by the time they got there, Zacchaeus was a new man.

Just as happened when blind Bartimaeus met Jesus, Zacchaeus could finally see, not just who Jesus was, which is what he had set out to do, but also *who he himself was*.

And he didn’t like what he saw. His eyes had been opened to his own selfishness, his own violence, his own unjustness. He didn’t want to live like that anymore, blind to his own sin, sitting by the side of the road taking, taking, taking, just as blind Bartimaeus had sat by the side of the road begging. Zacchaeus was collecting tax money but losing his soul.

So Zacchaeus stood up in the middle of the crowd and promised half of his possessions to the poor on the spot!

And he said, “If I have cheated anybody out of anything” – and we know that he had likely cheated everybody out of something – “I will repay the amount four times over!”

He *is* a wealthy man if he can afford to do that!

But now he is a changed man, and that’s what’s most important. Jesus tells Zacchaeus that salvation has come to his house this day, even though Zacchaeus only thought it was Jesus who was coming to his house.

Jesus calls Zacchaeus a ‘son of Abraham’, that is, a man in good standing in the people of Israel.

And then, turning to the crowd, Jesus addresses their complaints: “The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

Zacchaeus, extorting, robbing, cheating, swindling Zacchaeus, suddenly found himself among the saints.

The stories of Bartimaeus and Zacchaeus are some of my favorite stories because they say so much about who Jesus is. Bartimaeus thinks he knows Jesus as a man who can help him. The crowd think they know Jesus as a person who can put on a good show. And Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus doesn’t know much about Jesus at all, but something inside of him is telling him that he needs to find out. That’s what Zacchaeus wanted to find out at the beginning of the story, and by the end, he knows.

Jesus is the one who sees us when no one else does. He can see us when we are hiding up in the branches, when we don’t want to be seen, when we are embarrassed to be seen for what we are.

Jesus is the one who calls us by name to come out of the place where we are hiding and to come to him. In fact, Jesus is the one who invites himself into our homes and our lives as soon as we even start to get interested in finding out who he is.

Jesus is the one who is always passing by, who always hears us when we call to him, as he heard blind Bartimaeus calling to him over the crowd.

Jesus is the one who comes to us even when we don't call him if we show the least bit of interest in finding out who he is, just as he came to Zacchaeus.

Jesus is the one who helps us to see who we are and how we are living, and what has gone wrong to separate us from God and from each other. Jesus is the one who inspires us to want to do better, to come back to God, to share with the poor, to become a saint.

Jesus is the one whose presence in our homes brings salvation to them. We don't even have to invite him in, as he is quite willing to invite himself, as he did with Zacchaeus!

Jesus is the one who will come to us while we are still sinners, who will find us where we are hiding, who will call us to himself by name, who will make himself unclean to make us clean, who will seek us and save us when we didn't even know we were lost.

That's what Zacchaeus found out when he wanted to see who Jesus was. And that's who Jesus still is today, who Jesus has ever been for all the saints.

There is still a chance to see who Jesus is today, for he is passing by again, coming to our house today, to share a meal with us.

He is here with us today in the bread and the wine that is on our table.

He has come again to seek and to save those who are lost, that we, too, may become children of God when salvation comes to our house.

Amen