

SERMON: God On Our Level
TEXT: Luke 19:1-10

10-30-22

His name was Mike, and we were in history class together in high school. Mike was short; one of the shortest people in school. Granted, we were just sophomores, so he was probably wishing on all the stars every night that his growth spurt was still to come. But he was a jerk. He was rude and insulting to everyone.

One day as class was just starting, Mike said something offensive to a cheerleader. She got angry and said she should slap him across the face. Our history teacher was also a jerk, and he took pleasure in stoking such drama in the classroom. He told the cheerleader to go ahead and slap Mike. "Really?" she asked. "Sure, go ahead."

The teacher made Mike and the cheerleader stand up in front of the class and face each other. Trying to be tough, Mike was willing, and even agreed that he deserved to be slapped. The cheerleader continued to hesitate, afraid she would get into

trouble. But the teacher finally convinced her. She slapped Mike so hard that his cheek turned bright red. Redder even than his face already was: flushed with embarrassment and humiliation. The cheerleader laughed nervously; she knew it was wrong, but she was a victim of not peer pressure, but *teacher* pressure. The teacher placed her in the spotlight of this horrifying classroom spectacle.

My stomach still turns every time I think of it. The only thing that makes me feel better - though it was years later - is that the teacher was finally fired for even more egregious misconduct.

Though I didn't have any desire to befriend Mike, I did feel sorry for him. He didn't deserve that. He was bullied on a regular basis, stuffed into trash cans and locked inside his locker, and who knows what else. It's no wonder he was angry and rude.

Zacchaeus was also very short, and - despite that cute children's song that calls him a wee, little man - Zacchaeus was

also a jerk. In reading up on him, I found several strong words that Bible scholars use to describe him: hated, a traitor, corrupt, and wealthy by extortion and embezzlement. Of course, it could also be true that he was bullied for being short. And maybe his work was a way of getting back at the bullies. Maybe he enjoyed overpowering others financially after being overpowered physically all his life. And though his short stature created limitations and obstacles for him, he wasn't going to let it keep him from seeing Jesus.

This happens toward the end of Jesus' ministry. He's on his way to Jerusalem, where he will be overpowered. Arrested, tried, and crucified. He is well known by this time. So, Zacchaeus has most likely heard about Jesus and his love and acceptance of many who were outcast and on the fringes of society. He has probably heard that Jesus dined with prostitutes and touched lepers. Certainly he has heard that a fellow tax collector was one of Jesus' closest friends. No doubt Zacchaeus was curious about this man and wanted to see for himself. And don't you suppose

that he wondered what it would feel like to be welcomed and accepted and loved for a change?

So, Zacchaeus climbed up a tree in order to see over the crowd that was gathered to watch Jesus pass by. And Jesus saw him. Jesus saw right through him. Jesus saw his loneliness and his pain. Jesus saw his deep craving for acceptance and love.

Jesus called Zacchaeus out of the tree, for he wanted to visit with him at his home. Although Zacchaeus is the one who comes down to meet Jesus on the street, this is a story of how God in Jesus meets us on our level. God in Jesus meets us where we are and accepts us for who we are.

We can all relate to the awkwardness of someone inviting themselves to your house. It was a breach of etiquette in Bible times as well. But Jesus always placed compassion above rules. And for one who was rarely welcome anywhere, Zacchaeus felt

the warmth and the depth of Jesus' love the very moment the Savior called his name.

Furthermore, to be a guest in someone's home meant that you would share a meal together. One commentary noted the significance of this unspoken detail: "Table fellowship... denotes not merely friendliness, but parity and acceptance." Everyone around the table - whether saint or sinner, whether host or guest, whether ruler or peasant, whether citizen or foreigner - is on the same level. And there is room for everyone.

For Zacchaeus, who has always been among the lowest of the low - both physically and in the eyes of society - this extravagant welcome and acceptance from Jesus causes an immediate and full and extravagant transformation. He declares, "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."

This response to me is rather surprising and quite admirable. It's hard to believe, actually, because I don't think many of us are that quick to repent, nor that generous in our repentance. I mean, wouldn't you wait to see what Jesus required of you before you offered to pay back *four times as much*? Can't you just hear Jesus thinking to himself, "Gosh, I was only gonna say twice as much, but okay, four times as much sounds good!"

And there's a connection here to the verses we read from Second Thessalonians. Verse eleven says, "To this end we always pray for you, asking that our God will make you *worthy of his call* and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith..." It feels wrong to me for anyone to feel *worthy* of God's call. From all we've learned about Zacchaeus, he had no worthy qualities.

It's kind of a double-edged sword. We're all called, but none of us are worthy. The church has been called the "priesthood of

all believers,” making us all called to do God’s work according to the gifts we’ve been given. But we know we can’t earn our way into heaven with good works. The only thing that makes us worthy of salvation is that Jesus sacrificed himself on the cross. That is the only thing that saves us.

Just as Jesus invited Zacchaeus to come down out of the tree, indeed Jesus invites all of us into relationship with him and accepts us as we are. And what makes us worthy of his call is our response to that invitation. Like Zacchaeus, we need to come down out of the tree, “happy to welcome him” (as the NRSV puts it). We need to be ready and willing to repent of our sins and even to go back and right the wrongs of our past. Ready and willing to receive Jesus into our homes and our lives. Ready and willing to become who God calls us to be and to go where God calls us to go. Ready and willing to meet others on their level, to lift them up, and to extend our table to make room for all.

The story of Zacchaeus is a story of God coming down to our level. And isn't that the very basis of our belief? For God so loved the world, that he sent his only son. The divine Lord and Creator of all took on human form, came down to earth to meet us. Face to face, in the flesh, on our level. To show us unconditional, sacrificial, saving love. For each one of us and for the world.

May we receive him and welcome him and dedicate our lives to following him... to the glory of God!

AMEN.