

Make room on the front row

I love this story about Zacchaeus climbing the tree. Partly because he climbs a tree - and who doesn't like that! There's something very childlike and enthusiastic about it.

And I like it because Zacchaeus is a creative problem solver. He really wants to see Jesus - to "see who Jesus is" the scripture says- and when he encounters a barrier he finds a way around it.

And there is always something satisfying in a story with an underdog who turns into a hero. Not only does Zacchaeus climb the tree, he gets Jesus' attention, hosts him, and turns out to be super generous.

As a reader or listener of this story, Zacchaeus is the man to follow. The one to identify with. The model for how to seek out Jesus and respond in faith. He is, like us, a sinner whom Jesus loves.

But here's the thing: If I put myself in that story I am probably not Zacchaeus. I am more likely the crowd standing right in front of him. And that doesn't feel so good. After all, I have been a Jesus follower as long as I can remember, and I've made pretty public commitments to make Jesus accessible to other people...but when I read this story it makes me wonder. Are there ways I've blocked people from seeing who Jesus is?

The reason Zacchaeus climbs the tree is because he cannot see ON ACCOUNT OF THE CROWD. You can say it is because he is short, but if you've ever been in a crowd of tall people, you know there is a way to let short people see. You let them stand in front of you. You notice them, pay attention, and share your space.

But the crowd doesn't do that. They are all there to see Jesus - clearly there is something about Jesus and his message they like - but apparently they are not ready to actually embrace the message. They block Zacchaeus - probably without even noticing that is what they were doing. But when they do notice him, it is to complain that he has caught Jesus' attention.

The fact that Zacchaeus turns out to be a hero in this story is unexpected. The first thing we learn about him is that he is a wealthy tax collector, which means he made money by exploiting other people - tax collectors in that day got to keep for themselves anything above what was actually owed in taxes. And earlier in Luke's gospel Jesus doesn't have great things to say about the rich. He tells stories that put the rich in a negative light in comparison to the poor.

Luke begins with Mary's song, "He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty.

There are Jesus' words from the sermon on the plain, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God...but woe to you who are rich, for you have received your reward."

And of course, there's the parable about the rich man who looks up from Hades to see poor, sickly Lazarus being comforted by Abraham after death.

So here we have in Zacchaeus a person who exemplifies the sinful, greedy rich. He is the real life character that Jesus has been telling stories about, the type of person who represents all that we should not be or aspire to be. And yet he is the one who catches Jesus' eye.

If we read this story backwards from the end, perhaps we get a clue about what is happening here, why Jesus sees Zacchaeus among all those lining the street that day. Jesus says that he "came to seek out and to save the lost."

And Zacchaeus was certainly lost - isolated by his wealth and his job and his reputation. Lost behind a crowd that blocks his access to Jesus.

He's lost behind someone perhaps like me, who has a front row place to see who Jesus is.

I've never had to climb a tree to see who Jesus is - not literally or figuratively. When I was small, people made room for me to see Jesus in worship and in Sunday school. When I was new in town, people scooted over and let me see who Jesus is at fellowship meals and group projects. When I have felt small, people lifted me up so I could see that Jesus saw me and invited me in.

But now, I am the tall person on the front row. I'm the one with a great view to who Jesus is. I've had the benefit of other people letting me in and making sure I could see. And I have to wonder: how am I letting people see - and how am I blocking their view? It's a question perhaps all of us could ask about ourselves or even about this whole community.

I was lucky to be in a conversation this week with a theologian named Norman Wirzba. He's written a lot about ecology, religion, and the ways that human communities can flourish. Preparing for the talk, I read some of his work, which included some really great reflections about how people can live more generously with each other. He says: "To live generously is to believe that things are worth sharing and others worth sharing with."

That certainly speaks to the Zacchaeus story. What if the crowd believed that what they knew of Jesus was so life-giving that they HAD to share it? And moreover, what if they believed that all the other people seeking Jesus were worth sharing with? They'd have been looking for Zacchaeus.

Sometimes in the church - and out in the world - we take the opposite approach. We think, "If something is worth having or knowing about, you should find a way to get it." This presumes so much -

that all people have equal access to what we have,
that worthy things are for those in a position to seek them, that accessing what we value is an individual project that doesn't require sharing.

Those attitudes are barriers. They block the view to who Jesus is. This attitude tells the lost ones, the seekers - there's something about yourself you need to change before you can see who Jesus is. If a person is too complicated - has a disreputable job or smells bad or hangs out with the wrong crowd - they might have to run down the street and climb a tree to see what it is we're all excited about here.

But what if instead, some of us scooted over and made room for someone who's had trouble seeing who Jesus is? What if those people who have trouble seeing Jesus in scripture or out in the world could see Jesus in how we treated them and welcomed them in.

Keep in mind, the barrier for Zacchaeus was not his short height. It was the people blocking him. If they'd let him in, he'd be able to see no matter his height.

And keep in mind, Jesus found Zacchaeus. Was the crowd so lucky? By their grumbling I'd say probably not.

So what are the barriers that are keeping people from seeing Jesus in our community? in what ways are we blocking them? And how can we let them have a better view of who Jesus is?

The world can be a mean place. Most of us have felt that. And if we feel lost in that meanness, we can be assured both that others are too, and that Jesus is seeking them.

How can you scoot over and let other people see who Jesus is?

One way is to pay **attention**, notice the people around you who need a little grace. Let someone ahead of you in traffic, especially at rush hour. Thank the customer service representative before you hung up the phone. Make eye contact with people!

Accept the worthiness of every person who is seeking Jesus - no matter their questions, language, mental health, gender identity, past religious affiliation. No matter their job! NO matter how they may have been hurt by religion before. Jesus will seek and find them, but what will it say about us if we don't scoot over and let them have a front row seat?

I think we generally do a good job here at St. Mark's of letting people in and giving them a good view of who Jesus is. I really do. The challenge for most people is not how to do that on Sunday at church. The challenge is doing it all the rest of the week, out in the world where people least expect to see who Jesus is.

We're busy, frustrated, exhausted. It takes effort and intent to think about the other people around us who could use a dose of Jesus on a hard day.

But once a week (at least) we are given room on the front row to see Jesus and what he's all about. We have greeters at the door, a pew with space for you, tacos and coffee. We have friendly classes for children and adults. We have people here who pray for you.

Once a week we are literally fed with Jesus.

And that gives us the nudge we can use to pay attention and reach out to the people around us who don't have that attention and access.

So, this week, I encourage you first to notice all the ways you see who Jesus is here on Sunday and every day out in the world. Notice the ways you encounter barriers.

(And if you find barriers here, please let me and Zac know!)

Then, look around you and see if there's a way to let someone scoot in and see who Jesus is this week.

Show unexpected, unearned kindness to a stranger.

Be patient with people who are facing the same frustrations you have in life.

When you do, you might meet someone like Zacchaeus, detested and generous, frustrated and seeking Jesus. Just like the rest of us.

Amen.