Rev. Janet R. Doyle

Elmer Presbyterian Church

24th Sunday after Pentecost

Sunday, November 8, 2026

Scripture: Luke 19: 1-10

Sermon: Out on a Limb

Our sermon today concerns an encounter Jesus had with a man named Zacchaeus who was sitting in a sycamore tree out on a limb. Zacchaeus is a Hebrew name meaning “clean or pure” but he was a corrupt tax collector who worked for the Roman Government. This encounter is one of the most interesting stories of the Gospels.

As the children’s song goes: “Zacchaeus was a wee little man”, but that was not the reason the people of Jericho despised him. In verse 2 we read that “he was a chief tax collector and was rich.” Another way to understand the peoples’ animosity is that he had become rich at their expense. He was a corrupt tax collector. There was so much bitterness that in verse 7 the crowd showed their dislike for Zacchaeus by grumbling and calling him “a sinner”.

Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but because he is short he cannot see over the crowds, so he climbs a tree and goes out on a limb. When Jesus arrives at the place where Zacchaeus has perched himself, he calls him down and invites himself to Zacchaeus’ home, which surprises Zacchaeus bringing him joy but the crowd hearing this is also shocked because they know that Zacchaeus is a sinner.

Luke, more than any other evangelist, is concerned about matters of wealth and the treatment of the poor. In the previous chapter a rich man, when asked to give away all he had, leaves Jesus because he wants his wealth. The story of Zacchaeus forms something of a contrast to that of the rich young ruler. You’ll recall the rich young ruler comes to Jesus with a sincere question. He comes to Jesus and asks, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”, and Jesus says, “Follow the commands.” And the rich young ruler says, “All of these things I’ve kept since I was a boy.” He’s kept all of the commands and Jesus says “If you want to be made whole, sell all that you have, give it to the poor, and come and follow me.”

You know what the scriptures say, the scriptures say that rich man went away sad, why, because he had much wealth. It’s a sobering account. It

serves as a warning about the deceitfulness of wealth and attachment to worldly things. Things of the world can keep us from embracing Christ and fully following Him, but in verse 24 Jesus asked this question, " How hard is it for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven? It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to inherit eternal life." Salvation seems not only difficult, but impossible for the rich if not for everyone. Jesus answers this perplexing question with this statement in Luke 18: 27. He says, "What is impossible with man is possible with God." As we think about the mission of Christ it makes the impossible possible, not only for Zacchaeus, but for you and for me.

In this scripture lesson today another rich man receives Jesus with joy and promises to give half of his wealth to the poor and promises to restore fourfold any amount he may have stolen from people, and Jesus announces that the impossible has now happened as "salvation has come to this house" (19:9).

In the Book of Joshua the city of Jericho is both a historically and theologically significant town. We know Joshua fought The Battle of Jericho. Jericho was that place of the great victory of God for his people and now the greater Jesus nearing the height of his mission encounters Zacchaeus here. By this time, Jericho had become a beautiful thriving city. The climate was delightful, sycamore trees lined the roads, there was a grand theatre in Jericho, it was the center of a vast trade network. There was lots of business and commerce which meant plenty of taxes. It's the kind of place where a wealthy person would enjoy living and doing business so you could picture Zacchaeus there in Jericho. Life is good it seems for Zacchaeus, a rich man in a rich city but something is missing in his life and he wants to see this man Jesus that everyone has been talking about.

Zacchaeus seems to know that he is a sinner. And so he's in this tree, out on the limb, waiting for Jesus to pass by. He's looking at Jesus, or looking for Jesus. We have this intersection, this encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus and what we see next is very important. In verse 5, who initiates this encounter? It's Jesus. Jesus calls to Zacchaeus, he not only calls, but he commands Zacchaeus. He says, "Zacchaeus, come hurry down from there, get down from there, get out of that tree and come to me." And what becomes apparent as this story unfolds, so we might think it's Zacchaeus looking for Jesus, but actually what we come to see is Jesus is looking for Zacchaeus, and here we see his mission to seek and save the lost. He says, "Zacchaeus,

I am coming to you, for today I must stay at your house." So, Jesus invites himself over. How does Zacchaeus respond?

Verse 6. So he hurried and came down and received Jesus joyfully. Now think about this, he might be a little bit intimidated. This is a holy righteous man and Zacchaeus knows that he is not holy and righteous.

We are told that Jesus frequently dined with His enemies, the Pharisees, but there was something different about this occasion.

Jesus said He must go to the home of Zacchaeus is obvious. Zacchaeus was lost. Jesus told us that He came to seek and to save those who were lost. Zacchaeus had some interest in Jesus and some indirect knowledge of Him, if only from the buzz of rumor and the crowds talking about the uncanny stranger. He wanted to see what it was all about. He was interested enough to go out on a limb in the sycamore tree to see what Jesus was doing, but he was lost.

Zacchaeus stood up and said to Jesus, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

We are told that if we truly repent and come to Christ, we should go out of our way to make restitution to those we have injured or hurt.

After spending some time with Jesus and coming to true faith, the fruit of Zacchaeus' repentance was indicated by what he said: "Whatever I have done wrong, I am going to try to make right. I will give half of my goods to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone, I will restore it fourfold."

By seeing him, calling him, staying with him, and blessing him, Jesus declares for all to hear that this one, even this chief tax collector, is a child of Abraham and child of God. Perhaps Jesus is again at work seeking out those who are lost, whether through their own actions or those around them, in order to find, save, and restore them.

Jesus declared that what is impossible for humans is possible for God (18:27). Zacchaeus is one more example of the impossible possibility that Jesus can do in our lives. We can begin again, we can have reconciliation with others, we can make God our priority.

Jesus came to seek and to save the lost. Jesus knows our name and seeks us out. Zacchaeus is eager to share his commitment to being different because of Jesus. Jesus is now his master instead of money. He will repay and make good for the ways he has taken advantage of others.

Zacchaeus's hospitality expands as part of his repentance. He is willing to give up his wealth. Jesus tells Zacchaeus that he has found a new life. With God as his master, and not wealth, Zacchaeus has been found by the Son of Man and become part of God's family.

Jesus called Zacchaeus by name. He made eye contact and spoke to him face to face. Jesus communicated to Zacchaeus that he was glad to see him. This was not an interruption in the Messiah's schedule. Jesus always has time for those who seek Him.

Andrew Carnegie was born in 1835 in a tiny one-room home in Dunfermline, Scotland and grew up in deep poverty as the son of a handloom weaver. His family fled to the United States in 1848, settling in Pennsylvania where 13-year-old Carnegie worked in a textile mill for just $1.20 a week. He took jobs as a bobbin boy, messenger, and telegraph operator, eventually learning the inner workings of the Pennsylvania Railroad and becoming a division superintendent. He reinvested his earnings into iron, bridges, and telegraphs before launching Carnegie Steel Company, which grew into a massive industrial empire.

In 1901, he sold his company to J.P. Morgan for $480 million making him one of the wealthiest people in history at the time and dedicated his remaining years to massive philanthropy giving.

There is a new movie coming out about Milton Hershey and his wife. Milton Hershey learned perseverance through failure. Catherine Hershey practiced service through action. Together, they believed success should create opportunity for others.

Through their success in chocolate, they built organizations that endure schools, community spaces, and a trust that still supports children today. The Milton Hershey School was founded in 1909. Milton and his wife Catherine established a residential school for orphaned boys, now the co-educational Milton Hershey School.

In 1918, Hershey secretly transferred his entire fortune and control of the company into a trust to perpetually fund the school.

We must be careful to understand that these men gave away their wealth to others to make a difference in the world and Zacchaeus did not purchase his salvation by giving money to the poor. His actions just reveal a life transformed by an encounter with Christ. After experiencing the love of Christ, he became more concerned about others than splurging on selfish desires.

Another interesting part of this story is that Zacchaeus did not change jobs. He was a tax collector before he met Jesus, and he continued collecting taxes after he met Jesus. His job was the same, but destiny was different. He now used his job as an opportunity to give glory to God.

Perhaps you have heard the saying, "To reach the fruit of a tree, you must go out on a limb." That is what Zacchaeus did. The salvation he received is still available today. Follow his example by not allowing anything to prevent you from receiving all that God desires for your life and making a difference in the world.