

*“Running and Jumping and Climbing”*

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**Old Testament Lesson:** Psalm 119:137-144

**New Testament Lesson:** Luke 19:1-10

From time to time, someone will come to me asking for financial assistance from the church. It's not uncommon for their needs to be surprisingly similar from one person to another: a loved one has died and they need money to get to the funeral, which is out of town. Or they're here from out of town for the funeral, but don't have bus fare back. Or they have a job all lined up and just need money to get there.

I always start by asking how long they or their family have lived in the area. It's usually several years or all their life. Then I ask about friends or family who might help them. They have none. They have no connection to a church. By the time I begin exploring ways they might get on a firm foundation, they begin to get angry. They don't want to talk about making a real difference in their lives. They just want the money.

Of course, that's not always the case, and I do help people – you help people, through your offerings at this church. Your church helps people who are working to get ahead, and we seek to be gracious in doing so. But rarely if ever is there a free handout. It almost always involves a plan and commitment to get to the next level.

In today's New Testament reading, Zacchaeus was in need, and he had a plan and commitment to get to the next level. Zacchaeus did not have a financial need, but a relational need, a social need. As chief tax collector, Zacchaeus was a big man in the government, but he was “short in stature” as a friend to his neighbors.

Luke tells us this about Zacchaeus, saying, “He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature,” Which implies that the crowd didn't care enough for him to give him a view of Jesus. Zacchaeus came up short in the eyes of his neighbors. And not because of his height, but because of his sin, his greed. The only way a tax collector got rich in the time of Jesus was by overcharging people. So his neighbors didn't like him at all.

What changed for Zacchaeus? I mean, the townspeople call him a sinner, but by the end of the story, Jesus calls him a saint, a son of Abraham, saying “The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost,” even lost souls like Zacchaeus. Of course, when it comes to being a sinner, we are all lost. We all stand before God only by the grace of the Lord.

It's just that few of us have our sin thrown in our faces like Zacchaeus did, literally, people's backs – and butts – right in his face.

And in that moment – with his life choices blocking him from seeing who Jesus really is – Zacchaeus has a change of heart. Zacchaeus realizes that his wealth and power and even his comfort are trivial.

And the same is true for us. Aside from the love of family and/or friends – and the Lord – everything else is trivial? We know this, in our heart of hearts. We know that our material possessions are not important, because we know that there is a peace that surpasses all understanding. Peace even after the loss of a loved one, comfort even amid the greatest injury or illness, success even following our biggest failure.

We know this, as Christians, but do we act that way? Not always. Too often we cling to our idea of what success looks like, our desire to have more stuff, our unrealistic expectations about health and life and death.

As writer Keith Miller puts it, Jesus never gave people “the answers they wanted him to. He never said, ‘I will come and give you the answers you want until the end of the age.’ He said, ‘I will come and I will be with you,’ even to the end of the age.

“What we really want is presence (relationship),” says Miller. “And if we're present to each other, God is in us, (so) then God will be with them.”<sup>1</sup> With us. People see God in us, and we see God in others.

Of course, Zacchaeus saw Jesus face-to-face. And Jesus says to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” Can you imagine hearing that from the Lord? “I must stay at your house, Peggy; your house, Kent; your house, Emily...” I mean aside from the panic of cleaning up, that's pretty cool. But that's kind of the point. God already knows what you're house looks like, all the time. And that goes for the home you live in and the skin you're wearing, the thoughts your thinking, the words you are muttering under your breath.

God knows all this about me and you and everybody, and still God says to us, “I must come to your house, today, right now,” if you'll have me. And there's the difference between Zacchaeus and us. Zacchaeus goes running off to welcome the Lord, but do we? No. Too often, we are less than welcoming when it comes to letting Jesus into all aspects of our lives, every corner of our little world. Heck, there are corners of our lives we won't even look into anymore.

But not Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus receives Jesus so fully that he's willing to set everything else aside. Luke tells us that when Zacchaeus heard about Jesus, he was so drawn to him that he “ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see

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<sup>1</sup> The Door, July/August 1998, 21.

him....” And when Jesus actually spoke to him, Zacchaeus “... hurried down and was happy to welcome him.”

Zacchaeus put everything on the line to welcome the Lord – both his wealth and his pride. A grown man like Zacchaeus would never be caught running and jumping and climbing after anyone. That type of behavior was completely unreasonable for a grown man at the time of Jesus, and particularly so for a rich man like Zacchaeus.

But if it means drawing close to Jesus, Zacchaeus is happy to set aside his pride – and to channel his wealth toward the poor! “... Half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor;” says Zacchaeus, “and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”

In other words, I will go above and beyond to make room for you in my life, Jesus. That’s Zacchaeus. And that who we are as followers of Christ, people willing to go above and beyond, even beyond what the world things is reasonable.

It’s not reasonable to give to the church, but it is a joy being part of something bigger than ourselves; it’s not reasonable to spend your free time as a LOGOS teacher, cook or table parent, but it is a joy to support the children and youth of First Church and our community – through Proctor Elementary and the Community Service League and so much more; it’s not reasonable to serve on a committee or board, but it is a joy to serve on behalf of others; it’s not reasonable to spend your day feeding the homeless, but it is a joy to help those in need.

Heck, in some people’s eyes, it’s not even reasonable to get out of bed on Sunday morning and come to church, but it is a joy to worship God and be sent forth in service to Christ. Being a Christian means being unreasonable enough to go running and jumping and climbing after a God no one has ever seen, in service to a Lord far off in heaven, following a Spirit so contrary to the rest of the world. And yet in doing so, we receive a joy beyond measure, a love that cannot end, hope that springs eternal, and a sense of peace that passes all understanding.

The next time you feel put upon by your service in Christ, or misjudged by the world around you, or left behind in this fast-passed society of ours, remember that you, like Zacchaeus, are called by the Lord, called to be a little unreasonable when it comes to the joy, love, hope and peace of God – maybe a lot unreasonable.

Because you, like Zacchaeus, are a seeker after Christ, someone willing to let it all go, and go running and jumping and climbing after Jesus, to the glory of God. Amen.

## Pastoral Prayer

Most loving God, we are mindful of you as we gather together in this sacred place for prayer. We thank you that you are always present to us, to guide and to strengthen, especially when we are uncertain and lonely and grieving.

We pray for those who feel abandoned and isolated, for those who feel as if they have been left behind while everyone else continues on their way.

We offer our prayers for those who are in transition, who feel as though they walk on uncertain ground. We lift our prayers for those who are far away from loved ones. We pray for all those who feel the need to be surrounded by your love in a special way at this time.

Keep us mindful, O God, of how Jesus walked this earth, of his triumph over loneliness, isolation and even death. And put us – and our loved ones – on the sure foundation of the ground that he walked upon, by a faith that cannot falter.

Help us to remember that no matter where we are – you are there, even as you are with us now in prayer, the prayer that you taught us which we pray together now, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; And forgive us our debts as we  
forgive our debtors.  
And lead us not into temptation, But deliver us from evil,  
For Thine is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.**