



Is It “Today” Yet?

TEXT
Luke 19:1–10

August 7, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

“**W**hatcha doing?” That’s a common way to begin a conversation; and if someone asks you, I bet you would have no trouble responding. If you pay attention, people are busy — doing things all the time.

But if Jesus asked you, “What have you been doing?” what would you say?

Zacchaeus wanted to get a glimpse of Jesus. It’s a cute story. The wee little man climbs the tree. I was taught that it wasn’t dignified for a grown man to climb a tree. I don’t know if that is true or not. It does seem a little silly. But I would love to think that, if getting a glimpse of Jesus was possible, I might be willing to do something silly, like climb a sycamore tree.

Zacchaeus gets more than a glimpse. Not only does Zacchaeus see Jesus, Jesus sees Zacchaeus. That may be more than Zacchaeus bargained for. Seeing Jesus is one thing; Jesus seeing us is something else.

In his book *Spiritual Theology*, Diogenes Allen has said, “I wonder what it would be like to live every moment of one’s life aware of the presence of God.” Then he says, “I do not mean

that I actually wanted to live that way, because it would be quite daunting.”¹

Want it or not, Jesus spots Zacchaeus in the tree. Knowing that we are seen is complicated ... even daunting.

In his book *Good News From North Haven*, Michael Lindvall tells of the Rev. Mitchell Simpson.² Rev. Simpson was pastor of the Johnston Memorial Church. One Sunday morning, Mitch put his wireless microphone on and didn’t notice that it was in the “on” position. As the congregation gathered in the sanctuary, they could hear him rustling papers on this desk. From his office window, he saw the Bengtsons. They were Congregationalists, and everyone knew the Congregationalist church was in the middle of a real donnybrook.

Mitch opened his office door. The congregation looked up at the speakers in the sanctuary. He saw an Elder in the hallway and said, “Sam, the Bengtsons are visiting with us today. Be nice to ’em.” He closed his office door and said to a very attentive congregation, “Maybe some angry Congregationalist will fire up this worn out congregation.” Rev. Simpson had been drinking coffee since six o’clock that morning, so he stepped into the men’s

room. The congregation learned that the microphone works well throughout the church building.

Like people in an elevator watch the numbers, everyone in the sanctuary lifted their heads to watch the speakers. Only when Mitch Simpson stepped into the sanctuary did he realize that he had been broadcasting live and in person. They had heard his careless comments, and they had heard ... well, they had heard him. It was more than he could take. He resigned the next week. “He absolutely crumbled when 57 Presbyterians became accidentally omniscient — and really saw him.”

We want to be seen, but most of us have limits to what we want seen. Seeing Jesus is one thing; being seen by Jesus is something else.

So we might expect Zacchaeus to be embarrassed or ashamed, but he is not. He is happy to welcome Jesus. He is. He can’t wait to welcome him.

No one else is happy about it. They grumble because Zacchaeus was not part of their community. Zacchaeus wasn’t a righteous dude. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and we have talked before about how the tax collectors had tremendous power, a power they often abused. They

were not trusted. They were not welcomed into the community. They were hated.

But this is not a problem for Jesus. “I want to be with you today.” Zacchaeus hurries down and is happy to welcome Jesus.

People grumble because they know that being at table is not about nutrition. We have learned that this summer. It’s about relationship. Grace is served at the table. Connection is served at the table. At table, we belong to one another. And when Jesus is there, salvation can be served at the table.

Jesus says, “Today salvation has come to this house.”

When the church talks about salvation, it may make you think of going to heaven. But salvation is more complicated than that. Salvation is first about getting some heaven into us. It’s about things being made right. If that’s the case, salvation has not come to our house yet. There is too much that is still broken, still injured, still hurting.

It seems to me that there is a growing hunger for things to be made right. Maybe there is just a growing awareness of how things *aren’t* right. To use the language of the text, salvation has not come yet, not completely, not in its fullness. We are still waiting. And while we wait, we are wondering what to do.

That’s why I am glad we know about Zacchaeus.

We hear his conversation with Jesus: “I will give half of what I own to the poor; and if I defraud anyone, I will repay them four times over.” That’s quite a lifestyle change. It sounds

like Zacchaeus has had a conversion. It sounds like that, but we would be wrong to understand this conversation that way.

Here’s the thing. Zacchaeus is not actually telling Jesus how he is going to live differently. He is telling Jesus how he already lives.

You see, the English translation is different from the Greek. I can’t tell you why, but when we read this in English the verbs are future tense. *I will give ... I will repay*. But that’s not what the Greek says. The Greek is present tense. *I give ... I repay*. That’s different.

Zacchaeus is not telling Jesus how he is going to live his faith; Zacchaeus is telling Jesus how he already lives his faith. This is what Zacchaeus has been doing.

No wonder Jesus talks about salvation. To understand this moment, we have to remember the prophets. The prophets were always telling us how to prepare for salvation, how to prepare for things to be made right.

The prophet John the Baptist was in that tradition. When John was preaching, he said, “Salvation is coming.”

And folks asked John, “What do we do?”

He gave them some simple guidance. “If you have two coats, share with those who have none.”

And tax collectors asked him, “What do we do?”

“Don’t defraud anyone.”

Now I don’t know if Zacchaeus ever trekked out to the wilderness to listen to John preach, but he lived what John taught. “If you have two coats ... share.”

Zacchaeus said, “Half of what I own, I give to the poor.”

“Don’t defraud.”

Zacchaeus says, “If I do, I repay it four times.”

So Jesus says, “Today salvation comes to this house ... for this is what a child of Abraham looks like.”

If I understand the text, this is the reason Jesus calls this man from the sycamore tree. He wants us to know what to do when we are still waiting for salvation.

Maybe it is because Zacchaeus knew what it was to be unwelcomed in the community. Maybe it’s because he knew what it felt like to be ostracized. Maybe it is because he knew what it was like to never really be seen, to be hated. Maybe, I don’t know, but maybe that is why he spent his life paying attention to those no one else saw. He spent his life building community.

Think about this. If you were going to serve the poor in Jesus’ day, how would you do that? There’s no food pantry to drop off food. There’s no donation box or United Way to contribute at work. You would have to meet them. You would have to welcome them to your table. You would have to notice them. You would have to befriend them.

If I get it, Jesus is telling us this is the way to prepare for salvation. This is the way to make things right.

Let me tell you about my friend David. He was a one-shingle attorney in Jacksonville. His wife Winkie — yes, I’m not making that up — was quite the football fan. David was quite the cook. When the Sunday school

class met for a cookout, Winkie was in the backyard with the guys debating the benefits of zone defense; David was in the kitchen swapping recipes for lemon meringue pie.

He never called attention to himself. To my knowledge, he never served on a board. He never joined a club. He never held a leadership position. He was never elected to anything. I asked him once to serve on a church committee, and he said he wasn't good at that kind of thing.

He was no mover and shaker. His resume could probably fit on a Post-it note. The only thing I can tell you about my friend is that every time I asked him, "David, how are you doing?" he answered "I'm better now that I've seen you."

He'd say, "Oh, good you are here. I've been wanting to talk with you. Do you have a minute? Tell me about everything," he'd say.

He went to the doctor because he had a cough. Within a week, he was gone.

We held his service, and we couldn't get everyone in the church. There were leaders of the community, and there were people that no one else knew. People who couldn't get inside stood outside in the Florida heat because ... well, because he saw us; he made us a community.

That's what it looks like to wait for salvation. In a world broken like ours, it may seem small, but it matters. And Jesus will notice.

The day will come when Jesus will say: "Tom, I want to

stay with you today. What have you been doing?"

I hope it will sound like I have been preparing for salvation to come. I hope so.

¹Diogenes Allen, *Spiritual Theology* (1997), p. 2

²This story is found in Lindvall's *Good News From North Haven*, pp. 133–139. The telling here is paraphrased from Lindvall's script.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.