

Sermon: Small Man, Big Amends
By: Ms. Paula Rumbolt
May 22, 2022

We are going to look at a man named Zacchaeus. I remember hearing this story when I was a young girl in Sunday School. We even had a little song we used to sing about it. Back then, it was just another Bible story I learned. Now, it is a lot more than “just a story” to me. My hope for today is that this familiar story will take on a deeper meaning for each of us.

Since there is no Children’s Time today, I am going to begin by telling Zacchaeus’ story from his point of view.

“I heard that Jesus was going to be passing through the city and I had been hearing many stories about Him and what He was doing, like healing sick people, raising the dead, and casting out demons. He seemed pretty important and I wanted to see Him. I knew that He wouldn’t want anything to do with me, I mean, I was a tax collector and I cheated a lot of people out of their money. I was not popular among the people, in fact, most of them hated me. But, I did my job and I was rich, and that was all that mattered to me.

The streets were so full of people. I am a short man so I couldn’t see over any of them! Why do I have to be short? I’ve been made fun of all my life for being this small man. My height has been an insecurity for me for as long as I can remember. That’s why I took the tax collector job. People didn’t respect me, or even see me, so I took a position of power that forced people to see me. No one could ignore me when I had that job.

I decided to run ahead of the crowd and climb a sycamore tree so that I would at least be able to see Jesus as He walked by. I wanted to get a glimpse of Him. As I sat there, I saw Him walking right towards the tree I was in. I figured He wouldn’t see me, but that was okay. I just wanted to look at the man whose stories were being spread across the land.

I watched as He approached my tree. He had such a following. Everyone was calling out to Him. It looked like He was on a mission to get through the city and on to the next town. Then He started slowing down. Then He stopped, right under my tree. He stopped right below me. What was He doing? Then, He looked right up at me! Why did He look at me? And He knew my name! He called out and said, “Zacchaeus!” I was startled and in shock. Jesus said, “hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” My house? Wow. Jesus wanted to stay at my house! Did He not know who I was and what I had done?

Amazed that Jesus would want to spend time with me, I quickly climbed down the tree and gladly welcomed Him into my home. Being called by Him made me so happy!

As I looked around at the people, they were upset and grumbling that Jesus would want to go to my house. They called me a notorious sinner because I robbed my own people. I was a Jew who worked for the Romans, and the people considered me a traitor. So when Jesus called my name, they were angry.

As I stood there with Jesus, our eyes locked and I was suddenly aware of my sin. There was grace and mercy in His eyes. No judgment, no condemnation, just love. In that moment, I knew I had to make amends for all the wrongs I had done towards the people of my city. The time with Jesus completely changed my life. I told Jesus that I would give half of my possessions to the poor and give back four times as much as what I had defrauded people for. I knew I had sinned against people and I needed to make things right with them. If Jesus could show grace to someone like me, the least I could do would be to show grace to others. I needed to demonstrate my inner change by outward action.

Then Jesus affirmed that I was a son of Abraham. I wasn't living like it up to that point, but meeting Jesus and having Him change my life reaffirmed my identity. I was one of God's chosen people yet I was so lost. I had been relying on myself and my own strength, and doing what I wanted to try and find security instead of relying on who God says I am. I was lost and Jesus found me. Jesus stopped His journey just to meet with me. He came to seek and save me. He came to find me because I was lost."

Verses 1-3 - Zacchaeus is Lost

The first thing we notice in this story is that Zacchaeus was lost. He was a Jew, which means he grew up hearing the Word of God and observing the traditional laws. He knew who God was and for a part of his life had observed the rituals and did all the right things. Then, somewhere along the way, he took a different path. He took a job with the Romans, collecting taxes. And, he was really good at it because he rose to the position of "chief" tax collector and he was rich. Zacchaeus had lost his way.

While we don't know a lot about Zacchaeus' life, the Bible says that he was short. Have you ever wondered why that was added? I think Luke put in that detail because it is foundational to the story. It gives us the one piece of his life that everything else revolved around - his insecurity.

Being short was the driving factor behind everything he did in his life. He grew up not being seen, and likely being made fun of, so he decided to get a job that would force others to see him and demand attention, even if it was negative attention. He became a tax collector for the Romans (the Romans being the ones who ruled the country), to compensate for his insecurity.

Perhaps some of us can relate to Zacchaeus' vertical challenge and can think of things we've done to overcompensate. Perhaps you've taken a job that demands others to notice you. Perhaps you have a big voice, or a big personality, or you're a social media influencer. I have the opposite challenge. I was always big and tall, and that contributed to my insecurity. I overcompensate by hunching, shrinking back, being a wallflower, and doing things to draw attention away from me.

Perhaps your insecurity has nothing to do with your height. Perhaps it is another body feature that people made fun of, such as being clumsy, or too loud, or too quiet, or too ... fill in the blank. What is it that you are insecure about?

Staying with the example of my height and size being an insecurity for me, I realized that I have hurt others by being a people-pleaser, not using my voice, and having a lack of boundaries. I especially see how this has played out in my parenting. I have rarely been one to take charge, to enforce house rules, or to say 'no' to the kids' requests. Instead, I passively agree to things and bury my head in my pillow at the first sign of conflict. My inaction has not been a good example to my children and they have had to learn how to compensate for my insecurity.

How have you hurt others by acting out of your insecurity?

Zacchaeus also hurt people out of his insecurity. He stole from them and used his position of power to take advantage of people. Both Zacchaeus and I used coping behaviours as a way of covering our insecurity instead of dealing with it, and it hurt others.

Verses 4-7 - Jesus Sees Zacchaeus

The second thing we notice is that Jesus sees Zacchaeus. When Zacchaeus heard that Jesus would be passing through the city, he wanted to see Him. He probably remembered stories from his childhood about the coming Messiah, and if the rumours he heard were true, this Jesus could be that Messiah. So, Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd and climbed a sycamore tree because he wanted to get a glimpse of Jesus. He had no idea that Jesus wanted to get a glimpse of him, too.

When Jesus came by, He looked up at Zacchaeus and called him by name. "Zacchaeus!" He said. "Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today." Jesus knows our names, too. And, He comes to us in our insecurities, in our messiness, and in our sin. Zacchaeus thought he wasn't good enough to be seen by Jesus. The people didn't like Zacchaeus, and while on the outside Zacchaeus didn't care what they said, on the inside it stung. The crowd tried to block Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus - first, by their height, and second, by their words. The amazing thing is that Jesus saw Zacchaeus in his insecurity and he didn't have to be cleaned up first.

Have you had people in your life who tried to block you from seeing Jesus? When I was a teenager, I had a relative tell me how big and ugly I am. That reinforced my insecurity and kept me in hiding.

Have you used excuses to block yourself from seeing Jesus? Perhaps you've said things like, "Jesus could never love someone like me" or "The mess I made is just too big" or "I have nothing to give" or "Jesus can't use me."

The beautiful truth of Jesus is that He sees us, meets us, and loves us exactly where we are. Whether that is walking with the crowd or hiding in a tree, Jesus knows where we are and He wants to come to our house. When Jesus called Zacchaeus, he had to leave his place of comfort in order to go with Jesus. This reminds me of Peter when Jesus told him to get out of the boat and walk towards Jesus on the water. Jesus often calls us out of our comfort zones to follow Him.

Zacchaeus quickly climbed down from the tree. I would like to say that I quickly jump out of my place of comfort when Jesus calls me, but that is not true. I move slowly, take a look around, try to be sure that it is in fact Jesus who is calling me, talk to some people and get their opinion, and I check to see if I will have a safe landing.

Not Zacchaeus! He quickly climbed down and happily took Jesus to his house.

Verse 8 - Jesus Changed Zacchaeus

The third thing we see in this story is that Jesus changed Zacchaeus. Verse 8 of Zacchaeus' story says he "stood there." Some translations say he "stood there before the Lord." There is no indication as to how long they stood facing each other, but what we do know is that in the time Zacchaeus spent with Jesus, he realized the harm he had done to others. We, too, need to spend time with Jesus for Him to reveal to us the people we have hurt. Zacchaeus then admits the harm he's done. He says out loud, "if I have defrauded anyone of anything." They both knew he had harmed people by taking from them more than he should have.

This is when Zacchaeus made amends for the harm he had caused others.

What does "Amends" mean anyway?

First, let's look at the word "sorry." When I was teaching preschoolers at a summer camp many years ago, the definition I learned for "I'm sorry" is "I wish I hadn't done that." It is very simple and has stuck with me over the years.

Amends means to correct a mistake you have made. Making amends is more than simply saying, "I'm sorry." It often includes compensation or restitution. Amends means action.

The first time I looked back over my life and made a list of all the people I had harmed because of my own insecurity, there were quite a number of names. That was a few years ago now, and I have since made amends with many of them. It's not comfortable to admit when I have hurt others and to seek their forgiveness, but it is certainly worth it.

Perhaps you are asking, "Why should I drag up the past?"

The answer is simple: making amends is not about our *past* so much as it is about our *future*. Before we can have the healthy relationships we desire, we need to clean out the guilt, shame, and pain that has caused hurt in many of our relationships.

If we look back at Zacchaeus' story, the people he made amends with were angry and volatile. This was a situation where words were not enough. Zacchaeus' amends included being willing to pay back those he had cheated four times what he took, and he was willing to give half of his wealth to the poor. Imagine being Zacchaeus and going personally to every person you had stolen from, apologizing, and giving them four times what you had taken from them. Zacchaeus was a small man, but he made a big amends. I believe that when Zacchaeus looked in the eyes

of all those people he had harmed, he didn't feel insecure and he didn't want them to be afraid of him. Instead, I think he looked at them the same way Jesus had looked at him - with kindness, forgiveness, and love.

Making amends is not for the other person. We need to approach those we offer forgiveness or amends with humility, honesty, and sincerity. We also need to approach them willingly and not because we have to. We need to focus only on our part without offering excuses or attempting to justify our actions.

When Zacchaeus made amends, he didn't expect anything back. Surprisingly, him giving back the money he took, plus a whole lot more, was not the most significant part of his amends. The freedom and forgiveness he received from Jesus was the biggest gift in this story. Zacchaeus was seen by Jesus and from that moment forward he didn't need to spend his life trying to be seen by others. Jesus replaced his insecurity with his true identity which is only found in God. Zacchaeus giving to those he cheated was an outpouring of the love and acceptance he had received from Jesus.

Zacchaeus didn't give back the money to those he cheated until Jesus changed his heart. When we rush ahead, our hearts may not yet be in the right place. They may not be soft enough yet or our motives may be out of line. We cannot offer true amends until our hearts are right with Jesus.

Before making amends, we need to pray, asking Jesus Christ for His guidance, His direction, and His perfect timing. We don't want to injure others because we've rushed ahead of God.

Verse 9-10 - Zacchaeus is Found

The final thing I want to point out from this story is that Zacchaeus is found. Jesus said, "*Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham.*" Abraham was an Old Testament follower of God. To be called a true son of Abraham would be equivalent to being called a follower of Jesus today. Jesus encouraged Zacchaeus by reminding him that his faith and identity is in God.

I have a friend like this in my life. She encourages me to find my identity in Jesus and what He says about me instead of me listening to what others are saying about me.

The last thing Jesus says in the story of Zacchaeus is, "*the Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost.*" This is the heart of Christianity! We recognize that we are lost and powerless and we need Jesus to save us and restore us. We accept God's forgiveness, ask others to forgive us, and extend our forgiveness to others. Like the line in the famous song called Amazing Grace, "I once was lost but now I am found."

Wrap Up

Following Jesus doesn't mean that all our insecurities are suddenly going to disappear. It means that we become aware of them and we start working on them with Jesus. It means that we begin to find our identity in Jesus and we begin to believe that we are who HE says we are. It means we can be secure in who we are in Christ.

What does making amends look like in our lives? Perhaps some of you thought about people from your past that you would like to reach out to and ask their forgiveness for some harm you caused them. Perhaps you thought of relationships you would like to see restored. If so, talk to God about it and begin praying for the right time to make those amends. Talk to a trusted friend about what you want to do so they can support and encourage you, and so you don't have to do it on your own.

Perhaps you weren't looking far back into the past but instead you were thinking about all the controversy and differing opinions about Covid, masks, vaccines, and lockdown. It has divided families, businesses, and churches. People have said things out of fear of the unknown and out of their own insecurity. Maybe you were thinking about things you've said about the pandemic that has hurt or harmed other people and God has been telling you it is time to make amends and rebuild that relationship. As a community and a church, are there things we have done during Covid to harm others that we can make amends for?

Being seen and found by Jesus changed Zacchaeus' life. My life has been changed because Jesus saw and found me. Jesus looks for each one of us and He wants to have a personal relationship with you. Like Zacchaeus, it isn't enough to have learned about God as a child. Jesus wants to do life with you.

If you don't know Jesus or if you have questions about what it means to be His follower, I encourage you to speak to someone about that and discover what it means to be found by Jesus and to live in the security of your identity in Him.