

Climbing Trees – based on Luke 19:1-10
Aspen Community UMC
November 4, 2007

Page 1 of 7

When was the last time you climbed a tree?

What do you remember about it?

Andrew told me about a time he climbed a tree as a child in Denver. Fortunately, his uncle Pat (whom we visited this summer in Nova Scotia) came by the house, found Andy stuck up in the tree, and rescued him.

I used to climb a tree in Coggin Park in Brownwood, Texas. This tree stood in the middle of a block with small pecan trees dotting the remainder of the block,

It was a huge tree with a wide round trunk.

After scaling the wide trunk, there were three thick branches that went out in different ways, and attached to them were smaller branches that again went this way and that way, up and sideways.

It was daunting, and I was seldom brave enough to climb very high. When we go to Brownwood next week, we will see how big it is now.

Climbing trees gives us a different view of the world. Climbing that Sycamore tree was a life-changing event for Zaccheaus.

He must have been ready for a change, or he would not have scaled the tree in the first place to seek out and get a better view of Jesus.

Perhaps the life he thought he was building was not all it was trumped up to be.

It surely was nice to make so much money, and he would have made plenty even if he had not taken more than his share.

After a while, he may have noticed that something was missing.

We don't know why he climbed the tree that day to see Jesus.

We just know he wanted to see him.

What matters is that he climbed the tree and it changed his life.

Climbing Trees – based on Luke 19:1-10
Aspen Community UMC
November 4, 2007

Page 2 of 7

These old, old stories have so much more to say to us
than is on the surface.

The surface story is the one we have heard many times
of an individual, a sinner no less, finding Jesus, or of Jesus finding him,
and, as a result, finding salvation.

What does that mean?

It means he found a new way of seeing himself in relation to others,
and acting in relation to others, a new lifestyle, for this life and beyond.

We might just say that he met God in that tree,
and God took him to dinner at his own house.

We see more about the character of Jesus
how he would gladly discard religious custom
and enter the home of, and eat a meal with
someone considered unclean in traditional Judaism.

That leads me to want to share a little about the culture of that time.

During the time Jesus lived in Palestine,
there were four schools of religious thought.

Let's remember first that politically, the position of the Jews was desperate.

They had been dominated by Rome for the better part of a century,
and along with being deprived of freedoms,
they were being taxed way beyond what was just.

These four schools of thought were ways
people responded to this predicament causing people to divide themselves into
Pharisees, Sadducees, Essenes, or Zealots.

I'll just speak of two of them because these two
considered themselves renewal movements.

Climbing Trees – based on Luke 19:1-10
Aspen Community UMC
November 4, 2007

Page 3 of 7

The Pharisees remained within society.
They wanted to revitalize life and faith through Mosaic law and its holiness code.
These are the people who ridiculed Jesus for associating
with someone like Zaccaheus.

The Essenes thought the world was too corrupt.
They thought their faith could not be renewed from within, so they dropped out.
They were a kind of austere, contemplative movement.
They shared property and devoted themselves to lives of
discipline and prayer or meditation.
They were perhaps something like Teresa of Avila, who we studied last week.
The Essenes – this was the community and practice of John the Baptist,
Jesus' cousin to whom Jesus went for his own baptism in the Jordan River. ¹

Now that we have a little background,
would it be alright with you to take it deeper – as the roots of a tree go deep
and the roots of that Sycamore tree went deep?
And, take it higher – as the branches and leaves
of that Sycamore tree grew high and wide?
Would it be alright to take the story deeper and higher?

Within this story lies an imprint
of an ancient Jewish model for spiritual growth
called the Tree of Life, or Ets Chayyim.

The Tree of Life was an ancient symbol, more than a symbol.
In Judaism the Tree of Life (Ets Chayyim) was about a hidden
system of wisdom passed down over centuries.

Climbing Trees – based on Luke 19:1-10
Aspen Community UMC
November 4, 2007

Page 4 of 7

I want to tell you a little about it
and this environment of thought, of devotion, and practice
that I believe Jesus grew up in – at least after he was twelve.
Remember when he remained in the temple questioning the teachers
while his parents began the trip back to Nazareth?

In traditional Christian teaching we know nothing
about him from that time until he shows up to be baptized in the Jordan
by John, when he was about 30 years old.
Let's remember that John came from this group
I described earlier as the Essenes.

Dion Fortune writes about the Essenes.
They were what we might call esoteric, or contemplative,
(something like Teresa of Avila who lived much later,
and who we talked about last week).

This tradition has it that the boy Jesus ben Joseph (Jesus son of Joseph)
when the great teachers discovered
the depth of knowledge and understanding that he had -
invited him, or sent him, to the Essenian community near the Dead Sea.

And, this is where he was trained in the mystical tradition of Israel.²

And one reason scholars think this is true is because
we see it reflected in the words of Jesus himself
in the closing phrase of the Lord's Prayer.

He uses the words Malkuth, the Kingdom, Hod, the Glory, and Netzach, the Power.

These words have specific meanings in the structure
of this Tree of Life as described in the literature of mystical Judaism.

This literature is known as the Qabalah.³

Climbing Trees – based on Luke 19:1-10
Aspen Community UMC
November 4, 2007

Page 5 of 7

Rabbi David was teaching about the Qabalah this summer,
so if you sat in on any of his classes you might know something about the Qabalah.

There are really three bodies of literature in the ancient Hebrew tradition.
There was the Book of the Law and Prophets that we know as the Old Testament.
There was the Talmud, the collection of commentaries about the Old Testament.

And, there was the Qabalah, the mystical interpretation of the two.
Ancient rabbis were known to say that the first is the body of tradition.

The second is its rational soul. And the third its immortal spirit.

I tell you this because in the story of Zacchaeus,
we have the imprint of a bigger story and a pattern and method
for spiritual growth that is not directly mentioned in the story,
but certainly looms in a big way in the background.

The Tree of Life was a deep symbol for meditation
and spiritual practice for ancient Judaism.

But as Dion Fortune says, "Strangely enough,
Christians have seldom sought out the keys to the Old Testament in the Qabalah."⁴

So, we didn't hear much about this as Christians because very little of
mystical Judaism was incorporated
by Rome and the budding Christian church.

Perhaps it would have invited people to be too free.

It was, however, important in the life, learning, and teaching of Jesus.

Later, it came to be lodged in what are called
the eastern and western mystery schools.

It was always there. You just needed to know where to look.

And most students of Christianity, even in seminaries, did not know where to look.

Climbing Trees – based on Luke 19:1-10
Aspen Community UMC
November 4, 2007

Page 6 of 7

You will find it in people who were considered Christian mystics like Teresa of Avila and Meister Eckhart, T.S. Eliot, Thomas Merton and others.

But, back to our friend in the tree who so wanted to see Jesus,
and who was changed by that encounter -
and not just changed in a feel-good way.
His words and actions changed. His life changed.
He made restitution to people he had wronged,
and began to share the benefits of his life and work.

I expect the deeper waters of this story,
or perhaps I should say the roots and branches,
the deeper experiences of salvation, of enlightenment,
of communion with the divine that Zacchaeus experienced,
came from something much more ancient than we have thought.
Fortunately for us, this is part of the Hebrew tradition
that is coming more into the mainstream for both Jews and Christians.

I believe it has gifts for us –
when we view our own deep-rooted trees
in the forested mountains, or out there on the front lawn of our church.
The deeper we are willing to go
into the mysteries of our faith
the more we sense that we touch the divine -
just like Zaccheaus did that day in Jericho.
I believe it does take work, or we might call it “climbing.”
Climbing is study, prayer, worship, sharing our lives.
It’s being in the world together and reaching out to the world.
It is taking concrete action in faith to do our part.

Climbing Trees – based on Luke 19:1-10
Aspen Community UMC
November 4, 2007

Page 7 of 7

That's climbing.

And then in that climbing, we will be found
and invited to dinner in our own house.

In that climbing, we have the chance to encounter the transformation
we want and seek – the kind of life we seek even here today.

Yes, when was the last time you climbed a tree,
and when you were there, who discovered you?

Amen.

¹ Huston Smith. *The Soul of Christianity: Restoring the Great Tradition*. p. 43

² Dion Fortune. *The Mystical Qabalah*. p. 5

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.