

“A Sycamore Tree” based on Luke 19
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
October 31, 2010

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(The story of Zacchaeus climbing the Sycamore tree to see Jesus is a story that children act out in Sunday school. As adults we can examine the story more deeply for its meaning in a broader context.)

I can still remember my little brother
acting out this story in a Sunday school or children’s program.

“Zacchaeus – you come down!”

I did not think much about Sycamore trees then –
but having looked at a few pictures this week
I saw their wide trunks and substantial branches reaching up and out.

They make them great trees for children to climb.

We lived about two blocks from a park in Brownwood, Texas
where I grew up.

The park had a great tree like that.

Perhaps it was a Sycamore tree.

I spent a lot of time climbing that tree.

I was not as brave as some of the kids
and would not go as far up out on the branches as some.

Perhaps that says something about my willingness to risk.

This church is sending us off to Africa this week
to work with the people of a small village -
people most of us do not know – and a place we have never seen.

We are asked in our spiritual journey as Christians
to go out and make disciples.

I think of that as going out and building relationships of value –
relationships across cultures – helping where we can.

When people don’t have some appreciation for what it is like
to live in another culture - they tend to get in trouble.

When there are few personal relationships – we misunderstand so easily.

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But when I was a child – perhaps an adolescent -
I remember contemplating how seriously I was going to take Jesus
as I listened in church.
Church was a big part of my life.

I contemplated giving my life to him.
I don't remember if that was the language I used or we used.
I knew it was a direction of the heart.
I had heard about missionaries who went to far away places.
My own family had a few circuit riding preachers -
but they stayed pretty local.

When I was working on genealogy of the Bowden family
I learned that my great-great grandfather John Wesley Bowden
died when he took a fall from his horse at 91 years old.

He should have retired.
My great aunt may have been the first deaconess
in the Methodist Church.

I knew these people moved around.
So it seemed to me that if I took this Jesus thing seriously
I could end up places that might be really far away
and different – and scary.

When I thought about places very different and scary -
I thought about Africa.
If I let Jesus lead me – I could end up in Africa -
and wasn't sure about taking that risk.

I kept Jesus at a close distance.
I did not have much of a theology or Christology.
I just knew that there was a warm place in my heart

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and I knew I was loved deeply by the God-Jesus phenomena –
whatever it was.

But – Africa seemed very far away.

I needed to hedge my bet and wait it out for awhile at least.

I did not give it a thought until maybe 6 or 7 years ago.

And then Africa was where I longed to go.

Perhaps I had read about Schweitzer.

And I began to hear about the United Methodists going all kinds of places.

Africa is where I longed to go.



Do you ever think the divine messes with us?

Do you ever think the divine plants some kind of little sapling

in our minds and hearts -

that someday will be something like a Sycamore tree?

Drawing us toward something we might not otherwise do

or even think about?

Maybe that is what happened to Zacchaeus.

Here he was living his life - and it had become lucrative

being the head tax collector.

He knew he was ripping off people -

but that is just the way things were done.

Sometimes even in our society we take part in activities

that we know down deep are probably not so good -

not so caring for God's people and God's earth.

But it is just hard to extricate ourselves.

But maybe Zacchaeus was working on it.

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Zaccheaus could have been following Jesus from afar.
And today when Jesus was coming through Jericho
Zacchaeus just had to get a look at him.

And – like me- if he was going to actually see Jesus
he was going to have to climb up on something.

He climbs the Sycamore tree.

And Jesus noticing him?

And before you knew it Jesus was at his house for dinner
breaking bread – that holiest of things we do.
Breaking bread represents
that our relationships with God and one another are sacred.

The reading says that salvation came to Zacchaeus.
My interpretation goes more like this.

The divine was messing with him.
God was urging on something good in his life.

And thank goodness!

I don't begin to know how it works.
I just know it does.

So – what I would like to leave you with is
to invite you to think about the little saplings
God has planted in your life.
They may just be waiting to grow into something beautiful.

It may be ready to stretch its branches up and out
and make a difference.

What idea – or question – or clue
might be laying dormant waiting to come alive
and enrich your life in ways you never imagined?

It could be in something that has been intimidating in the past.
Or – something you have had a little curiosity about.
Something someone has asked you to think about doing.



The tree is a great image.

We first hear about trees in Genesis
when Adam and Even just have to have the fruit
from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

Maybe that reflects our nature
to act in ways that are sometimes at odds with a higher purpose.

There is another famous tree
and that is the Tree of Life.

The Tree of Life is the framework in Jewish mysticism.

The tree represents God.

The Jewish – the Kabbalistic – teaching
is to study the pattern of this tree of life
as a way to learn about ourselves.

God is portrayed in some ways as a tree.

The pattern of the tree is a way for us to think of our own lives
and our own learning –
our own wisdom.

We can do a little of that with this story.

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How willing are you to go out on a limb -
or even climb the tree in the first place -
not like me as a child afraid to climb very high.

But in your life to go out on a limb – so to speak -
with the possibility of growing into something God has in mind.

We process theologians would call that the divine lure -
but that just sounds so impersonal.

And while Zacchaeus may have been hated by the crowd
he was loved and valued by Jesus who comes to find him.

We can find some meaningful things in this Sycamore tree.



And now the time is coming to close the book –
the Gospel of Luke for awhile.

It has been a study in transforming love.

To recap a few of the images:

Zacchaeus was one last outcast on the way to Jerusalem.

Zacchaeus climbs up in a tree because he wants to see.

In the previous chapter Jesus healed a blind man so he could see.

There was the rich ruler who was not willing to give up much –
while Zacchaeus was – and it made all the difference.

And there was the Pharisee last week
with his arrogance about calling another person sinful.

Luke is in some ways a story of reversals.

But then – so is spiritual growth -
stretching our minds and hearts
to hold more of the world in tension
because there is little that is either/or or black/white.

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The gospels try to relay that message to us in all kinds of ways.



When we return from Africa we will begin Advent and move over to Matthew.

We will be preparing to live in to our story again which begins with a baby.

Nov. 28th is the first Sunday in Advent - and that week we will also begin a new study
with Paula’s leadership on “Angels in Our Lives.”

We thought that fitting for Advent.



And until then I want to express my thanks to you.

So many of you have laid your gifts before us
to go and extend the hospitality of this church - somewhere very far away.

My hope is that all of you – or at least most of you -
will be a part of something like this.

I would like for this church to be known
for its’ work and its relationships around the world -
this little church.

And as for me – what frightened me as a child -
is where I have dreamed to go as an adult.

So it has special meaning to me.

It is part of my own spiritual journey.

And we are all here to learn and see where it takes us.
So – keep us in your prayers and we will keep you in ours.

Thank you all.