

Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost  
2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Psalm 119; Luke 19:1-10  
October 30, 2016  
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When I was young teen growing up in Massachusetts, a professional golf tournament would come to a course not far from my home town. Being a golfer, I went one year and followed Arnold Palmer for several holes. I was part of what was called Arnie's Army, and let me tell you, it was massive.

This could never happen today, but I remember the crowd being so large that a friend and I actually climbed up some fairway trees to see Arnie over the horde of fans. I can't hear the story of Zacchaeus without remembering climbing a tree myself to catch a glimpse of one of my sports heroes.

We are told that Zacchaeus is short in stature. This is a most unusual detail even for Luke. Few if any people in the gospels are ever described by their physical traits. We know what John the Baptist wore and ate, but even Jesus is never described by his bodily appearance.

Zacchaeus's description is unique, which leads me to think that Luke wanted to say more about him than that he was just short in height. Because he was a chief tax collector and an especially wealthy one at that, he would have been all the more disliked by his community. He certainly would have been afforded little stature in Jericho. Furthermore, he would have been regarded as being short on character and morality for choosing to work with the Romans against his own people. Zacchaeus was, therefore, short or lacking in more ways than one.

If on the one hand, he was actually a small-sized person in relation to his peers, he may have suffered the kind of bullying that children still get today for being different in one way or another. He may have grown resentful of the people in his community who jokingly called him "Shorty," "Pee Wee" or worse – "Midget." He was short and possibly made to feel even smaller.

That reminds me of a friend of mine growing up. We played together on the golf team. His name was Charles, and we either called him Chuckie or "Dumbo" because he had ears that stuck out a bit. Dumbo was a cartoon elephant in a Disney movie, who had ears so big that he could fly with them.

Looking back, I am sure that Chuck hated to be called Dumbo. How demeaning and callous even his good friends could be. Whoever said names will never hurt me was absolutely wrong. Cuts and bruises can heal, but names can maim for life. I truly regret my lack of sensitivity to the feelings of others when I was younger.

Zacchaeus may have decided that the way he would get back at his peers was to join the enemy and take his community members' money. He would make them pay for their cruelty. His initial physical impediment and the way he was treated may have very well led to his other shortcomings.

This might make us reflect on how communities can contribute to the formation of people who may become a danger to themselves and others.

Maybe Zacchaeus enjoyed the payback and wealth tax collecting afforded him for a while, but it seems the glamour eventually wore off. He enjoyed the luxuries of being well off, but he had no friends, no life in the larger community. He was shunned and despised everywhere he went. He lacked what we all need most – love and support from more than just our family.

That is why the church and other civic organizations are so very important. They are places where everyone knows our name, made famous from the sitcom "Cheers." It was all about the regulars at a bar in Boston. (The church is much better place to be known than at a bar.)

When Zacchaeus hears that Jesus, the miracle worker and friend of outcasts, is in town, he will stop at nothing to see him. We can imagine the unfriendly crowd not letting him work his way to the front to get a good view, so he does what he has to. He climbs a tree like a child or golf fan would in his eagerness, desire and desperation.

One detail of this story that is often overlooked is the fact that when Jesus passes by, he not only notices a man in a tree, but he knows his name. Jesus knows this man's pain. He knows about his isolation and the pitfalls of wealth he has warned people about over and over. He can't wait to help Zacchaeus out of his dire predicament, which leads to his insistence that he visit with him in his home.

The community has withheld its love and affection for Zacchaeus, but Jesus has not. God is always love. God never withholds love to punish or manipulate.

Zacchaeus has gone out on a limb to get Jesus' attention, and Jesus goes out on a limb when he invites himself to this despised person's home. Jesus doesn't care about popularity. All the people who have lined the streets to see Jesus pass by suddenly turn against him because he is seeking yet another lost person and restoring him to health, happiness and the community.

The new Zacchaeus becomes a role model for how to use one's wealth in the service of others. He is an early philanthropist, a biblical Andrew Carnegie, Warren Buffet or Bill and Melinda Gates.

Finally, it struck me as I was thinking about Zacchaeus that he climbed a Sycamore tree, and Jesus called him from that Sycamore tree into his love. Our church is on South Sycamore Street.

We are, and I hope we will always be, a community of people who invite, welcome and include anyone who comes to us from Sycamore Street especially the lost, the lowly and any that the world has made to feel small. AMEN.