

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man,
and a wee little man was he.
He climbed up in a sycamore tree
For the Lord he wanted to see.
And when the Savior passed that way
He looked up in the tree.
And said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down!
For I'm going to your house today!
For I'm going to your house today!'¹

Zacchaeus is a Sunday School classic, and it's tempting to leave him with the children, so we grown-ups can get on to "bigger things." But, this morning, we're going to take a second look at this "wee little man;" he may be small in stature but he looms large as an example of what it means to repent of our sins and follow Jesus; his example invites us to see that there is more to repentance than guilt and shame; true repentance is the mark of a disciple; following Jesus changes us in ways large and small; sometimes what seems like a "small" thing to us can make all the difference in our world. Salvation comes to our house one change at a time; one positive change leads to another which leads to another and another, and when the dust settles after the last domino falls, we look up and discover that God is indeed making all things new – including us.

☑ Mr. Big Comes Clean

Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector in Jericho; a sizeable city in Jesus' day. He paid the price for this title; Rome demanded that the full tax be paid up front. Once the coins were in Rome's coffers, Zacchaeus received the power to levy taxes to recover his money; he hired tax collectors to make sure he made a handsome return on his investment.

Zacchaeus made offers you couldn't refuse. This little man was Mr. Big in Jericho. He was a villain, a blight, a pestilence; because of him, good days weren't so good, and bad days were made all the worse, because the shadow of Zacchaeus loomed large; he had to get his; the price of his sins was paid by every man, woman and

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zacchaeus_%28song%29

child in Jericho. Their blood, sweat and tears footed the bill for every party he threw, including the party for Jesus.

Mr. Big was also Mr. Clean – that’s what “Zacchaeus” means – “clean, upright.” Quite a name for a corrupt public official; Mr. Clean was dirty. So what was this Mr. Clean doing making a fool of himself to see Jesus?

A famous teacher, perhaps even the Messiah, has come to town; everybody’s talking about him; so what? What does that have to do with his life? There was money to be made, but he wouldn’t collect a cent by climbing up a tree to see the visiting celebrity. Shouldn’t he be supervising his staff to make sure they are on task? Time is money! So what makes Jesus worth the distraction?

Mr. Clean knew what he was; he knew that he was dirty; he had a big problem; he’d sold his soul and found out too late that the price was too steep. He longed for a second chance, but who would give Mr. Big a second chance? Would Jesus give him a second chance?

A man in his position had to be well-informed; knowledge is power, and power was all he had. Informed sources told him some amazing stories about Jesus. People called him, “the friend of sinners.” He gave the Pharisees fits. He saved a woman caught in adultery, and one of his disciples, his closest followers, was a tax collector named Matthew.

Zacchaeus knew enough to know that he wanted, he needed to know more. He needed to know if Jesus would give him a second chance, because if he wouldn’t do it, no one would.

Zacchaeus knew firsthand the truth that Jesus’ taught, *Luke 9:25 (NRSV) What does it profit [a man] if they gain the whole world, but lose or forfeit themselves?* He knew it, and he longed for the lost to be found.

The possibility of a second chance drew him that day. It lured him from his secure estate and the comfortable life he enjoyed. It led him to join the throng of people (some of whom would be more than happy to stick a knife in his ribs), and make a spectacle of himself by climbing a tree to get a better view.

Can you imagine how long it had been since Zacchaeus last climbed a tree? He was a bureaucrat, a desk jockey; the heaviest lifting he had done involved goblets of wine. He was in no shape to climb any trees!

He didn't care. He struggled. He made a fool of himself. People laughed at him. He didn't care. He was willing to do anything and risk everything for a second chance.

How about you? Would you like a second chance? Are you longing for a change? Step out of your comfort zone. Let go of your dignity and dare to believe that God isn't finished with you yet. New life can be yours; new life begins when Mr. Big comes clean.

True Repentance

Jesus saw Zacchaeus. He saw him; he knew him; he named him and made him an offer he couldn't refuse: *Luke 19:5 (NRSV) “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”*

Jesus is on borrowed time. He is on his way to Jerusalem; and he doesn't have far to go. Jericho is one of his last stops; it is the lowest and oldest city on earth; it is located in the rift valley just a few miles upstream from the Dead Sea; it has its own checkered history; when Joshua led Israel across the Jordan and into the Promised Land, job 1 was the battle of Jericho when those walls came a tumblin' down.

Now, another wall is about to come down. Jesus is the new Joshua (the name is the same); he is on his way to the lowest point in his life – the cross, and he stops on that way in the lowest city on earth and looks up and sees the lowest man in that town and he offers him a second chance: *Luke 19:5 (NRSV) “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”*

The town folk grumble, and who can blame them? Grace is scandalous precisely because it is grace – a gift that is free because it is God's to give; a gift that is a gift because we do not earn it or deserve it, but we can receive it.

Zacchaeus seizes his second chance. This camel fits through the eye of a needle; he receives Jesus' gift and responds with true repentance. He doesn't dwell on his

past. He doesn't wallow in his misery, "Woe is me! I was a bad man!" He makes a fresh start with a clean slate: *Luke 19:8 (NRSV) Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."*

True repentance does not look back; it looks forward; forward to the new life God is offering; forward to the promises yet to come; forward to the possibility of what life with God will be like.

True repentance lives today in the confident hope that God has good things in store for us tomorrow.

True repentance is the first step the prisoner takes out of our cell. We're free; free to do the right thing we've wanted to do but were afraid to do; free to make the choice that deep down we know is the best choice but whispers of doubts keep deterring us from taking that first step. We're free to be who we really are and not who we've allowed ourselves to become.

True repentance takes the chance; it seizes the moment; it steps out in faith.

We're not in our comfort zone. We're not in control. We're letting go and surrendering ourselves to God. It's terrifying and exhilarating; because when we take that step, we discover that we are not alone! The moment we dare to be a disciple and follow Jesus, he says to us, *Luke 19:9–10 (NRSV) "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*

Are you ready to take that chance? Is today your day to come clean? Jesus is looking for you. Do the right thing; not because you have to, but because it is the deepest longing of your heart. Let go of your dignity and dare to believe that God isn't finished with you yet. Jesus hasn't come to make you someone you aren't; he has come set you free to be who you really are. And there's more to come! Take your chance; step out in faith today. True repentance is the mark of a disciple. Amen.