

“Joy for the Unhappy”

Luke 19:1-10, Psalm 119:137-144

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Francis Hills believes, “It is risky coming to church. We are ‘out on a limb.’ We might see Jesus, and when we do, we will know salvation has come and we will never be the same.”

Scripture proclaims: **Luke 19:10 NLT “For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.” Luke 19:1-10 NLT “Jesus entered Jericho and made his way through the town. There was a man there named Zacchaeus. He was the chief tax collector in the region, and he had become very rich. He tried to get a look at Jesus, but he was too short to see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree beside the road, for Jesus was going to pass that way. 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.” Zacchaeus quickly climbed down and took Jesus to his house in great excitement and joy. But the people were displeased. “He has gone to be the guest of a notorious sinner,” they grumbled. Meanwhile, Zacchaeus stood before the Lord and said, “I will give half my wealth to the poor, Lord, and if I have cheated people on their taxes, I will give them back four times as much!” Jesus responded, “Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.”**

Zacchaeus was not a happy man. He was out of tune with himself, with his neighbors, and with God. Zacchaeus reveals that you can have it all and still not have what it is you really need. He was rich, had a beautiful home, and all the luxuries money can buy. He had a secure job, power, and authority. Yet he was empty, restless, and unfulfilled.

Pastor Harold McKeithen takes us into the life of Zacchaeus. “First, he did not feel good about himself, and the root of that was a physical trait over which he had no control. He was smaller and shorter than anybody around. As a youth, he had probably endured a lot of teasing about this, and there is a good chance that he had not gotten nearly enough reassurance from his parents and other people. So, instead of developing a healthy acceptance of his size, he became an increasingly self-conscious and aggressive loner.”

No one told Zacchaeus that God loves him. He turned to money, possessions, things, and his work to ease his pain. The most profitable career at that time was collecting taxes. He worked hard, excelled at his job, put in extra hours, and quickly met the demands of his supervisor; so, he was promoted again and again all the way up to chief tax collector. Money motivated Zacchaeus. He craved the affirmations of his supervisor who demanded that he get every penny he could from the people even if it sometimes meant not being fully honest, not fully revealing their strategy, and putting a spin on negative press. Buying things eased Zacchaeus’ pain but only for a fleeting moment, then he was empty again. His love of money and the shady business practices he was told to do caused him to feel alienated from God, unworthy of God’s love. He had become more and more unhappy with himself. He heard about Jesus healing diseases, feeding people, welcoming the outcast. He wondered if Jesus could heal him, a rich person who had everything except a joyful heart.

Zacchaeus resolved to meet Jesus. However he was short and could not see over the crowd. He tried to make his way to the front, but the crowd despised Zacchaeus and pushed him to the back. He looked around for someone to lift him up. Soon he was distraught realizing he did not have a single friend.

The emptiness, pain, and sadness welled up within him; but by the grace of God a desire to see Jesus urged him on. At that time breaking a social status rule resulted in being shamed, fired, and banned from your career. Two things the elite never did was run or climb a tree. Zacchaeus does both. Can you image Zacchaeus up in that tree snagging his designer robe, scuffing his expensive sandals, and his gold jewelry getting caught in the branches?

How much do we want to see Jesus? Enough to risk feeling foolish or embarrassed? Enough to risk losing our job? When we come to church we are a bit like Zacchaeus. The Holy Spirit gets us here. We want to experience God, to be forgiven, loved, fulfilled, transformed and leave full of hope, peace, love, joy, and abundant life. Coming to church is getting out on a limb, it is risky, for it is likely that our experience of God will change us. Jesus will invite himself into our hearts. We may come to be more generous, more loving, more forgiving, less concerned with money, more accepting of everyone and more passionate in caring for others. We will likely become the messengers to carry the gospel into the lives of our family, friends, coworkers and neighbors. We will likely discover God's healing and be provided with the true needs of our heart.

Pastor Harold McKeithen believes Zacchaeus was looking for help because his feelings of dissatisfaction had become stronger than his feelings of satisfaction. That is a good way for any person to decide whether to look for outside help. Your life ought to be a satisfying experience in which you feel in tune with yourself, your family, your friends and God. You should be able to sense God's love and see God's beauty and goodness around you. If it is not, and if you have not been able to remedy the situation on your own through prayer and worship, you ought to look for help.

Zacchaeus needed help. On one hand we have his neighbors standing in the way of his getting help. On the other hand is Jesus who helped Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus' neighbors judged him as a scoundrel. They had nothing but contempt for him. When Jesus shocked them all by going to Zacchaeus house they were displeased, grumbled, and complained. No matter which way Zacchaeus turned, he encountered a spirit of criticism and condemnation. He needed somebody to talk to, to confide in, to confess to; but a critic is the last person in the world to whom one is willing to make a confession, and everywhere Zacchaeus turned all he saw were critics.

Sometimes fear stands in the way of our being able to confide in someone, to get help. In our mind's eye, we imagine ourselves reaching out for help, to talk to someone and we imagine them misunderstanding, trying to fix us, judging or down playing the pain. We may have every reason to believe that they will help us, but fear often causes us to be silent allowing more negative pictures to run through our minds and loneliness in our hearts.

Tragically many of our experiences are counter to God's grace. God loves you. You belong to God's family. You are wonderfully made, cherished, accepted, and are being renewed by God all freely by God's love. However our experiences sometimes tell us we are loved and accepted only when we act the right way, get great grades, and are productive. Tragically sometimes the church reinforces this lie and fuels fear by urging works instead of grace. The church is a community of people with messed up, hurting lives seeking the healing of Jesus. Tragically, sometimes some church members project that we got it all figured out, that we are

somehow better, holier, know more or are more loving than those outside the church. It breaks my heart that those outside the church usually describe the church as judgmental when we are called to welcome all with God's grace.

The reason Zacchaeus' neighbors could not help him was that they judged and rejected his attitudes and behavior. They were critical of him. Failing to listen is a subtle form of criticism. When someone we love is hurting we tend to talk too much. We listen for a while then talk saying that things would not be this way if only they had done this or that. The past is over and gone. Each moment can be a fresh start. Or we assume we understand and talk saying you should do such and such. Or their story resonates with us, and we talk launching into a lengthy description of a similar experience of our own. We tell people what we would do if we were in their shoes, how they ought to feel, what they ought to do, etc. Talk, talk, talk! Before long we hear them saying with a sigh, "Well, you're probably right;" or they just change the subject. We have missed the opportunity to help, to listen, to ask questions, to be fully present, loving, and attentive.

Jesus listened to Zacchaeus. Jesus welcomed Zacchaeus the way he was. Jesus truly saw Zacchaeus and responded to his hurting with urgency. Jesus stopped what he was doing and gave his full attention to Zacchaeus. **Luke 19:5b "Zacchaeus!" Jesus said. "Quick, come down! I must be a guest in your home today."** Jesus met Zacchaeus where he was at, he accepted him. Jesus called Zacchaeus by his first name, informal, as a friend. Jesus wanted to be a guest in Zacchaeus' home. A guest comes to listen, to admire family pictures, to enjoy and be attentive to the host.

According to scripture the only thing Jesus did was offer himself to Zacchaeus in an uncritical, nonjudgmental, you are loved way. There is no record of any advice or teaching. Jesus apparently went to Zacchaeus' house to listen. With the barrier of judgment and fear out of the way, Zacchaeus was able to open up, to tell his story. Jesus listened.

Perhaps when Zacchaeus knew that, no matter what he revealed about himself, Jesus was still going to be for him rather than against him, that no matter what God loved him, he was able to admit to himself and to Jesus the kind of person he was, the kind of life he had been living. Having spoke his story out loud, he really heard it. He was able to decide whether he wanted to continue living like that or wanted to change. He was not being forced to decide one way or the other; but, as Jesus sat there listening, Zacchaeus realized that he would be lost, empty, if he simply went on in the same old way and that he could have a fresh start if he changed. He decided for a new life. Out of gratitude, Zacchaeus did way more than the law required.

The only words Jesus said at Zacchaeus home was, **Luke 19:9-10 "Salvation has come to this home today, for this man has shown himself to be a true son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost."**

This is the way Jesus comes to each of us. He does not come judging or condemning. He comes with grace, unconditional love. He offers a relationship in which you can admit to yourself and to him the kind of person you are and in which you can change or not change. There is no pressure. The choice is yours.

Sometimes we think of salvation as a future event. Jesus said, "Salvation has come today." Zacchaeus was already experiencing heaven, fulfillment, joy and abundant life. Jesus healed Zacchaeus, present and future. Jesus transforming salvation did much more than heal Zacchaeus, it healed those around him. Zacchaeus' changed lifestyle will benefit the whole community. When the lost are found, when the empty are fulfilled all enjoy healing.

Like Zacchaeus we come to church to meet God, to be transformed. Susanna Metz said. “Blessed are those who are not perfect, who are at times quite the seasoned sinners—but who nonetheless hold hope in their hearts, who can be surprised into giving more than they ever thought they could and who are willing to dream of being immersed in the goodness and love of God. Allow yourself to dream of being a person who so loves God that you become the poetry of God—God’s Word to others.”

Sometimes we meet God in scripture, in prayer, in singing. The psalmist was overwhelmed, felt insignificant, was despised and stressed out, but meets God in scripture causing them to be healed, filled with joy and vibrant life.

The psalmist sings. **Psalm 119:137-144 NLT** “**O Lord, you are righteous, and your regulations are fair. Your laws are perfect and completely trustworthy. I am overwhelmed with indignation, for my enemies have disregarded your words. Your promises have been thoroughly tested; that is why I love them so much. I am insignificant and despised, but I don’t forget your commandments. Your justice is eternal, and your instructions are perfectly true. As pressure and stress bear down on me, I find joy in your commands. Your laws are always right; help me to understand them so I may live.**” God is breaking through the realm of sin and its consequences of pain and loneliness to provide healing, love, and belonging.

Sometimes we meet God through another person who listens, cradled by God’s grace, we can discover insights, direction, and God. I meet Jesus by regularly seeing a spiritual director and also by being a member of group spiritual direction where we take turns sharing and listening.

A great joy of mine is seeing someone experience the grace of God. Both Ginny and I are trained in spiritual direction, to listen, ask questions, and help people see where God is healing their lives. If you feel empty and are searching for God, meet with me. I consider it a great honor to listen, and it is a great joy to see what God is doing in each person’s life. Or meet with Ginny or Google spiritual directors and meet with one of them, or talk with someone who will listen.

If you are feeling like Zacchaeus: empty, hurting, alone, troubled, or sad. If you are feeling like your access to God is being blocked. If you long to experience God and be healed, seek Jesus, read scripture, pray, sing, or talk to someone who will listen, someone who will help you perceive God or do whatever enables you to feel God’s love. Jesus will call you by name. Jesus will heal you. Jesus will fill you with joy and abundant life. **Luke 19:10 NLT** “**For the Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.**” Amen.