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**East Liberty Presbyterian Church**  
**October 31, 2010**  
**Luke 19:1-10**  
**“Sight Lines”**

Did many of you take Drivers' Ed classes? I remember first learning to drive and feeling overwhelmed by all the things I was supposed to do simultaneously: Are your hands in the right place on the steering wheel? Watch your gauges. Check the rearview mirror. Check the side mirror. Keep your eyes moving. Watch your blind spots. Watch your speed. Stay alert and, oh, try to relax more. Do you remember driving in city traffic, trying to keep an eye on everything: How fast am I going? Is that kid on the sidewalk going to dash into the street? Why aren't you using your turn signal? Do you remember driving your little economy car in traffic behind some huge vehicle – a gas-guzzling Escalade or Hummer or a semi? You can't see the traffic lights. You can't read the road signs. You can't see what's happening in front of you because your sight line is totally blocked.

Jesus was walking through Jericho. He didn't appear to be interested in stopping to enjoy any of the local hospitality. He and his disciples were on their way to the capital city of Jerusalem. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, but – how shall I put this? – he was a Honda Civic in a world of SUVs, a diminutive person stuck behind the starting line-up of the New York Knicks. He was, in the words of the famous Sunday School song, a “wee little man, a wee little man was he.” By the way, in one of my first seminary preaching classes, every student had to preach a sermon on this passage, and 4/5ths of them thought it would be highly original to begin their message by singing that Zacchaeus was a wee, little man. It's ruined me on that song for life...

Zacchaeus was trying to find sight lines that would allow him to see Jesus when he passed by on the road. In reality, his height wasn't the real problem. Zacchaeus was a tax collector. He had bought the franchise rights for the Jericho tax market. He would collect money from the residents, send off a set amount to Rome and pocket the difference for himself. Of all the tax collectors in that region, Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector and very wealthy. Because the money was going to the Romans, Zacchaeus was hated as a collaborator. And no one in a crowd makes room for you or defers to you if you are a collaborator. In fact, it was dangerous for collaborators to push their way into crowds. A quick move with a knife, a muffled cry, and no matter how many saw the violent act, no one would testify in court on behalf of a rich fat cat who had worked for the enemy.<sup>1</sup>

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, yet he had obstacles to overcome if he was going to do so: The literal backs of the crowds that blocked his sight lines because he was short. The way that his choices in life had turned people's backs toward him because he was a tax collector. The way that, despite his wealth, he lived alone on the margins. If you want to preach well on this passage, one option is to point out how Zacchaeus didn't let obstacles stand in his way of his desire to see Jesus. When he couldn't see Jesus on

the ground, Zacchaeus got creative. He did something unexpected, something contrary to the usual social customs. He climbed a tree.

What have you done lately in order to see Jesus? Setting the alarm clock and walking through the wide-open doors of this sanctuary doesn't count. What obstacles keep you from seeing Jesus, from moving far above the maddening crowd so you can see the Lord? What have you had to let go of in order to live a life that is faithful? These are rhetorical questions, but also intensely personal questions. The life of faith is not a walk in the park to a front-row seat before the throne of God. It is a different way to exist in this world, because it is not something of this world. It is intentional; it is sacrificial; it requires commitment; it calls for action. If you're tired of standing in the back of the crowd – if you're sick of staring at the back of people's heads – then maybe you need to climb a tree, go out on a limb for once, so you can see Jesus clearly at last.

Zacchaeus did that. He climbed a tree. He risked being called foolish by the world's standards, yet in that moment, he became wise in the eyes of God. He was named again a child of Abraham. He, the despised outsider, became the only one in the city to provide hospitality to Christ. And where he had done things wrong before, now he promised to put things right. Such is the transformation that comes from seeing the Son of God who came to seek out and save the lost.

You can preach a good sermon on this passage by holding up the example of Zacchaeus as one we should emulate – sharing his personal testimony that encourages us to make changes in our life so we can see Jesus and find salvation. But there is more to this story than Zacchaeus getting Jesus in his sight lines. There is also the matter of Jesus having Zacchaeus in his sight lines; and from that perspective we see something that opens up the whole gospel: the gospel of justice and compassion and true change.

For this part, I am grateful for the insights of theologian Kenneth Bailey. Let's start from a simple detail in the story: Zacchaeus climbed up a sycamore tree. For reasons of security and aesthetics, biblical towns did not like big trees, especially with low-hanging branches, near the city walls. Sycamores therefore had to grow a fair distance outside a town. Sycamores also have large leaves. So when the scripture says that Zacchaeus ran on ahead, he was not only getting away from a potentially hostile crowd, he was heading for a tree with low branches and big leaves in which he could hide.

Next question: How did Jesus know Zacchaeus' name? You can say, "He's the Son of God; he knows everything," but that distances us unnecessarily from Jesus' ministry. Bailey suggests a simpler explanation. What if someone in the crowd spotted Zacchaeus and began calling him by name, and likely calling him names. "There's the collaborator, the fink, the thief – he's up in a tree!" Things could well have turned ugly quickly. Jesus saw Zacchaeus and would have likely been expected to speak official words of condemnation toward this turncoat. He could have told Zacchaeus to stop betraying God and God's people, to repent and purify himself and thereby be restored

into the family of Abraham. And for such words, Jesus would have likely had the crowd's full support and hearty applause.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus, though, always had a way of welcoming the wrong people – and of breaking all the accepted conventions. No guest selects his host, but in this case, Jesus announced that Zacchaeus would provide hospitality for him. And by picking Zacchaeus, a sinner and man of impurity, Jesus was going to walk right into a house of sin and impurity – to sit on the chairs, eat at the table and sleep in the guest bed – becoming ritually defiled just hours before the start of the holy season of Passover. It was crazy, and the crowd grumbled exactly that. But Jesus took their hostility toward Zacchaeus upon himself. It is a foreshadowing of the cross that happened there by a sycamore tree outside Jericho.

You know what happens next. Zacchaeus is changed. He promises to make restitution, to give half of his wealth to the poor and pay back those he's defrauded fourfold amounts. A lost sheep has been found and brought back into the fold – so says a simple, personalistic sermon. But the gospel is not so personalistic. Salvation is never just a private matter. Zacchaeus' conversion had personal and social and economic dimensions. He was changed; his role in the community was transformed; and the poor received alms and the cheated gained restitution – all at the same time.<sup>3</sup>

The passage ends by saying “the Son of man came to seek out and save the lost.” “Lost” is a collective noun. Salvation is never just about individual tally marks in heaven, because that view makes it easy to focus on whether my tally mark is in God's ledger and insist that whether others' tally marks are there is their own business. Sure, we are to keep Jesus in our sight lines, and like Zacchaeus, we are to do whatever it takes so we can see him and make things right with God and others. But the good news is that Jesus has us in his sight lines. As with Zacchaeus, Jesus keeps welcoming the wrong people, including us. Jesus keeps breaking conventions and wants to dine with us. Jesus takes the wrath of others, the sins of the world, our irrational fears and hatred and lusts and addictions upon himself and transforms them – as he calls us by name and joins himself to us. Through this seeking out, the lost (a collective noun, remember?) are saved. The whole of life is affected. A foretaste is given of the complete reign of God.<sup>4</sup>

So drive safely. Keep your eyes moving. Share the road; share the earth. Make things right. Jesus has you in his sight lines, which is good news. Rejoice and be glad one and all.

AMEN

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 2008, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

<sup>3</sup> Fred Craddock, *Interpretation: Luke 18:31-19:28*, p. 220.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*