

Belonging
Luke 19:1-10
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7/28/13

We are in a series of sermons in which we are looking at the attributes of life in the Kingdom of God. Kingdom traits that characterize lives and communities that are saturated by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And today, we are going to be looking at the attribute of belonging. So I invite you to open your Bibles with me to Luke chapter 19, beginning at verse 1.

Now, you know you've made it in life if they write songs about you. And you *really* know you've made it if they write *children's* songs about you. The person of Zacchaeus only shows up one place in the Bible, but is forever remembered for a song:

“Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a Sycamore tree for Jesus he could see, for Jesus he could see. Zacchaeus, come down. I'm going to your house today, I'm going to your house today.”

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

I want you to imagine the first century equivalent of your favorite tropical vacation destination. And that's where our text finds us today. The city of Jericho is the oldest city in the civilized world, and it's also among the lowest in terms of elevation. Jericho is the Palm Springs of the Ancient world. In fact, Jericho is also called the City of Palms, as referenced in Deuteronomy 34. The climate is tropical. In fact, it was the winter destination for all the snowbirds from Palestinian Hill County, and the landscape is filled with Palm and Sycamore Trees, the very type of tree that Zacchaeus climbs.

But not just any Sycamore Tree. This week, I was reading some other translations and the New NIV translation notes something that everyone in the first century would have recognized: Zacchaeus doesn't just climb any Sycamore tree; he climbs a Sycamore *Fig* Tree. And when the Bible says that the Promised Land was a land flowing with milk and honey, it's not talking about honey that comes from bees. Most likely, it's talking about the sweetness that comes from the syrup of dates and sycamore figs. These trees were the

trees of the promise.

And here comes Jesus, walking through the City of Jericho, surrounded by onlookers and people wanting to catch a glimpse of the Rabbi. And among them is Zacchaeus clinging to a Sycamore Fig tree.

And here's a really interesting fact that I just read this week: Jewish Rabbis, for thousands and thousands of years, when describing the way Adam and Eve hid from God over the shame of eating a different, forbidden fruit, did so by hiding behind Sycamore Fig leaves. So you can see the irony here as Jesus comes into Jericho and sees Zacchaeus trying to hide behind the same sort of leaves that Adam and Eve did all the way back in Genesis 1. And do you think it brought a smile to Jesus' face as he looked up through all the hiding and all the foliage and says, "ZACCHAEUS, YOU QUIT MONKEYING AROUND UP THERE IN THAT TREE AND COME DOWN HERE, CAUSE I'M COMING OVER TO YOUR HOUSE FOR DINNER. HECK, I'M THINKING ABOUT SPENDING THE NIGHT!"

Now these days, we'll have dinner with just about anybody. But back then, to have dinner with someone meant you had nothing against them. It meant you belonged with them. Notice that Jesus didn't wait until Zacchaeus said, "Ok, Jesus, I'd like to invite you into my heart now." It didn't happen like that. More likely, Jesus was like, "OPEN UP ZACCHAEUS, CAUSE HERE I COME." Sure Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus, but the best he could hope for was a passing glance from the safety of a tree branch. But that's not how Jesus worked with Zacchaeus. He never could have expected the invitation, much less invasion of Jesus into his life. Jesus turns curiosity into camaraderie. He takes the fringe and brings them front and center. Because with Jesus, there is no safe distance, no detached discipleship. But the shock that Zacchaeus must have felt was nothing in comparison to the shock and repulsion felt by the crowd.

If you look at verse seven, you see that the crowd began to grumble or murmur, or complain or bellyache. Anyone have that spiritual gift? "HE HAS GONE TO BE THE GUEST OF A SINNER!" they proclaimed. And they're right. Zacchaeus doesn't have many friends; he was a cronie of the Roman Government charging outrageous fees for taxes because that's how he made a living. No one likes a tax collector. And no one liked Zacchaeus – the Jews, because he cheated them, then hid behind the power of Rome, nor the Romans, because he was a Jew. So he's catching it from both sides.

Everyone belongs to someone, except Zacchaeus, who has no one or no thing, except his money. And that is a cold comfort. Zacchaeus is like the Bernie Madoff of his day. Zacchaeus had to buy the right to charge taxes on behalf of the government. It was a system that was rife with corruption. Picture Jesus wining and dining with the failed executives of the Enron Corporation at a fancy restaurant and you get a sense of how scandalized the people were over what Jesus was doing.

Zacchaeus was probably all alone in the world. After all, he made up the skeevy underbelly, and yet here comes Jesus. Jesus always seems to be hanging out with the

wrong crowd. The Conservatives don't like him because he's fraternizing with the poor, the sick, the lazy, even the prostitutes. The Liberals of his day don't like him because he hangs out with the white collar criminals and the occupying Roman Soldiers.

GK Chesterton puts it this way in one of my favorite quotes: **“All people matter to God, you matter, I matter. It's the hardest thing in theology to believe.”** It's hard to believe because we carry around with us these unspoken, unpublished lists of the people we don't like. “God's allowed to love the whole world...just not that person.” Anne Lamott puts it perfectly when she says, “The surest way to know that you've created God in your own image is that God hates all the same people you do.” Let me say that again and let it sink in: “The surest way to know that you've created God in your own image is that God hates all the same people you do.” Ouch.

The people murmur in this story because they HATE, they HATE this man. Jesus should reprimand him, he should shun him, not eat with him. And what this exposes in the people is that they still prefer their own self-righteousness over the righteousness of God. In short, they still prefer religion to the gospel. With religion, we make the rules, we get to decide who's in and who's out, we get to decide who makes the cut and who doesn't. But with the gospel, there's nothing we can do to make God love us anymore and there is nothing we can do to make God love us any less. With the gospel we don't think more of ourselves, with the gospel we don't think less of ourselves; with the gospel we think of ourselves less.

Tim Keller has a great quote. He says, **“It's not just that anyone can come, it's that only anyone can come. It's not just that the unrespectable can find Jesus, it's that in a sense ONLY the unrespectables can find Jesus. Only those who know that they are in the same boat as everyone else, only those who know that they're no better than anyone else can come.”** The gospel is the only way to find true and authentic community, because it is the only way of relationship the only way of community that is not based on merit.

Without the gospel, we will constantly try to earn or jockey for position because you think that your value is based on what you can do. But with the gospel, you realize that there is nothing that you can do to make God love you anymore or less. With the gospel, you realize that your worth comes not from yourself, but from a gift that was given to you, from something that was done for you. It begins with “I must stay at your house,” and if received, it means that “salvation has come to this house.”

Now let's note what Jesus did and didn't do, and let's note the sequence. Jesus didn't preach to him. Jesus didn't scold him. Jesus didn't threaten him with hell. Jesus didn't denigrate or belittle him. Jesus didn't tell him the four-point plan of salvation. **The only thing Jesus did to Zacchaeus was accept him.** And as soon as Jesus did that, Zacchaeus was healed. That was the sequence. First, Zacchaeus was made to feel as if he belonged, then he lived as if he belonged. Jesus didn't say, “You do these things, then I'll accept you.” Jesus accepted him, then Zacchaeus began living as a new man.

This message utterly changed Zacchaeus. You wanna know how? Because the one thing he chased his entire life, the one thing that has consumed more thought and energy and time in his life—namely the pursuit of money—now has very little control over him. Zacchaeus is changed. Transparent honesty and unrestrained generosity become the evidence of a whole new way of life for him. Now instead of cheating people or using people, Zacchaeus will bless people. Instead of living a life of isolation in the guilt and shame of what he did, Jesus interrupted him and led him into a new life of freedom and opportunity that is based upon who he was. Who Jesus was and now, as he has just discovered, who Zacchaeus was as well. “Come out of the shadows, Zacchaeus, you belong with me.”

When I was a sophomore in college, I was a member of our baseball team at St. Olaf. And while I had not enjoyed any social status in my days in high school, just being on the team automatically opened up social circles to me that were to that point closed. And let me tell you, I was desperate to be liked, to be a part, to be accepted by my teammates and the coaching staff. So much so that when I would have a bad practice or would make a mistake in a game, I would come back to the field house after supper and take an extra 500 swings on the tee, or punish myself on the track or in the weight room. All of this got me no further in becoming a part of the in crowd with my team. It was as if the more I worked, the harder I tried, the more invisible I became.

And that all culminated one evening when I had been left out of a group that went somewhere on a Saturday night, and I found myself in my dorm room on a Friday night sitting at my computer feeling completely alone. I realized that I had tried so desperately to be one of them, to fit in and to be admired and appreciated and respected by my teammates, that I was completely and utterly lost. I had wandered so far from who I was that I no longer knew what direction I was going. I was running around trying to prove to others I was smart, I was funny, I was insightful, I was cool. It was utterly exhausting. I was lost.

Everything changed for me that Friday night when, as I sat at my computer, I got an email from a guy who had lived on my floor freshman year and had gone to chapel with me a couple times. In the email, he invited me to come to their Sunday night Bible study in his room. And that Sunday, sitting around a dorm room, these four guys ushered me – a lost, scared, insecure, arrogant boy – into the presence of the living Jesus. An invitation that became a part of my salvation.

Like Zacchaeus, I didn't need to climb the social ladders anymore, I didn't need to win others' approval. Like Zacchaeus, I didn't need to climb the social trees anymore, because in the cross, I learned that Jesus climbed the tree for me. And he proved beyond a shadow of a doubt that anyone, and I mean anyone, who trusts in him can belong to the kingdom of heaven.

Imagine Zacchaeus, whose name ironically means purity, coming to the realization that this chief of all sinners' name actually meant purity. He's not pure because of what he's done, he's not pure because of what he's done; he's pure because of the one who

welcomes him, the one who restores him to his rightful place as a son of Abraham.

In the midst of the crowds, in the midst of the murmuring, there is one who beckons us out of our tree house mentalities and out on to the street level where anyone, and I mean anyone, can belong. In fact, only anyone can belong. Because if we think that we are good enough, if we think that we are respectful or sophisticated or cultured enough on our own, then we haven't come to grips with the depths of our own lostness.

And all that is required is to warmly receive him. To accept the strange invitation for him to come and dwell with us. To put aside our lists and categories of who's in and who's out. I am not inviting you to be in general agreement with what I am saying, I am inviting you into a whole new way of life. A life where you're not valued because of your performance. A life where you are freed from your past resentments, insecurities, and fears. A life where you're freed from the jealousy and bitterness and anger that has had a grip on you. A life that is fragrant with the purity of God's promise. A life without muttering and murmuring. A life where invitation becomes salvation. A life so great that it's worthy of a song, even a bad children's song.