

A Man up a Tree

A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young

Presented on Sunday, October 31, 2010

Sermon Prayer:

Please pray with me. Gracious God, your word dwells in our midst; it informs us, your word shapes us to be your people to live as your children. And so I pray that as you speak to us in this time of worship that we will be attentive to your word and come to embrace your word that others might know through us your peace in Christ.

Amen.

Sermon:

Many years ago as a young preacher, I was introduced to a man who invited me to invest any extra money I had available with his investment company. Now to help you walk in my shoes a bit, we met in my office at the church and as the man entered I realized he had a lot of very fine gold jewelry on, very heavy gold necklace, beautiful gold cuff links, and a beautiful gold watch. He was wearing a very expensive, finely tailored suit. And so my first impression was, "Well, this is a slick guy." And that wasn't good for me.

After he gave me his pitch, which I listened to very patiently, I asked a very simple question. I asked him, "If I were to invest any money with your company, what would I be risking? What would I risk if I had some extra money that I decided I wanted to invest with your company?" And he looked at me and he said, "17.5%." And so I looked at him and I said, "Oh, in other words, if I invest some money with you I have the risk of losing 17.5% from my investment?" And he said, "No, no, Reverend, you're going to be risking making only 17.5% on your investment for one year." He said, "Most people that invest with my company realize 25% increase. Some have even experienced 35% in growth in a year's time in their investment." And I'm not exaggerating these figures, folks. He actually said this to me. And I just started laughing.

And there were two reasons why I started laughing, first off I was a young preacher, I didn't have any extra money. I don't know what he thought, but I didn't have any extra money. I'm a young preacher, I'm married, I have a young child at home, and the second hadn't been born yet. I didn't have any extra money to risk anywhere. And I

knew 17.5% income from that investment was not true. The other thing that went through my head that caused me to laugh was I heard my parents' voice. And they were saying to me in my mind, "If something sounds like it's too good to be true, it probably is." And so I just couldn't stop laughing.

And the man left my office disgusted. Once I finally put two and two together I realized really what he was hoping for was not just for me to invest with his company, he was hoping I would give him the list of congregants; the members of that church so he could start calling on them and giving them that same pitch to them. And once I realized that I was very happy I hadn't done anything with this guy.

Well, I tell that to get us to laugh a little bit and you chuckled a bit through that story. But what happens when I mention the name Bernie Madoff to you? What words come into your mind – arrogant, greedy, swindler, cheat, immoral, unethical? Probably some other words that I wouldn't say from this pulpit and you probably should not be thinking in this holy place. Maybe you, when you hear Bernie Madoff, you imagine an empire of wealth built from deception and greed. How about some naive, trusting people who were promised a get-rich-quick investment only to discover in the end that they had misplaced their trust - some losing their entire retirement? Do you see in your mind's eye a man walking the streets of New York City surrounded by a crushing crowd of reporters, disgraced and beaten as he was carried off to jail? Perhaps you're thinking jail wasn't enough for this guy.

The world has its fair share of individuals ready to take advantage of people in an effort to get them to part with their money so that they can be wealthy. Think of those who hijack relief workers who are bringing food and water and temporary shelter to disaster victims. Remember the greed of Wall Street and the misplaced trust of investors who lost money in the housing market because of bad mortgages. Or even imagine governments who keep the wealth of their country for themselves while those whom they are suppose to govern suffer in poverty.

Zacchaeus participated in such a racket. And that's who the man is at the beginning of this story. He was a head tax-collector. He was a Jew employed by the Roman government to collect taxes from those who lived in the region of Jericho. Zacchaeus had risen through the ranks of tax collectors and was now entrusted with organizing and overseeing the work of several tax collectors. The way the system worked was Rome

would tell their regional managers like Zacchaeus what the charge would be per citizen in their region. The head tax collector, the middle men, the managers would look at that tax fee and they would add a commission, a percentage, on to it as their payment. And then they would call in the tax collectors, the men that actually did the dirty work, they would call them in and say here is the tax you are to collect. It's Rome's tax plus the head tax collector's commission. And the tax collectors who actually did the work then added their commission on top of it. And then went out to you and to me and said this is how much you owe Rome. Zacchaeus was very successful. He had been a very successful footman in this little network that Rome had installed. He was very successful as a tax collector exacting money out of people while letting families starve or go without basic needs because they had to pay these high taxes. And because of his success and his loyalty to Rome Zacchaeus has risen to regional manager head tax collector, and now all he had to do was sit back and let the money roll in.

Just for a moment, if you're not there already with the Bernie Madoff story, put yourself in the place of the good citizens of Jericho who lived in the same community as Zacchaeus and were paying the taxes. Imagine yourself struggling to provide for your family's needs and having to pay exorbitant taxes for the privilege of living in your homeland which is now Roman occupied territory. Imagine further that you own countrymen – the people with whom you have grown up side by side - are the ones who are squeezing you for every last penny they say is due to Rome. And then imagine Zacchaeus, who for years was the one doing the arm twisting, now living in the lap of luxury while you search for food just to feed your children.

When Zacchaeus walked down the street – if he walked down the street - people would ridicule him; they would spit on him; they would treat him as a traitor – in their minds, because if they actually did that – if they actually treated him with the contempt they held for him in their hearts, they knew their taxes would go up more. And so when Zacchaeus walked down the street nobody looked at him. And if you heard his name at all, you would hear it as Zacchaeus - almost as if saying a curse word.

That's where this story begins. Zacchaeus is not some nice guy who just was a little misdirected and all he needed was a little Jesus fix and turned his life around. Zacchaeus was a man who was hated and despised and if he walked around town at all probably walked with a bodyguard because he knew the people of Jericho wanted him

out. Of course you know if they were successful in killing Zacchaeus, Rome would just appoint another head tax collector. It would be one of the other ones that are frequenting the homes of these wonderful people in Jericho just trying to do their best in their daily work to provide for their families and find some meaning in life.

Jesus, it's announced is coming to town and the people of Jericho who live under the tyranny of Rome and under the tyranny of Zacchaeus see a glimmer of hope. Word precedes Jesus' entrance into the city and the people gather on the streets to see the one that some are saying is the messiah. He's the savior. He's come to free us from Roman rule. He's come to throw out the tax collectors. He's come to reestablish the righteous rule of God in Israel. And so you can feel the electricity in the air as the people line the streets. And you know the little children in that town, they'd heard, the people had heard, the parents had heard that this Jesus was even saying, "Let the children come to me. Don't keep them away, let them come to me." And Jesus was blessing the children and so the little children who normally would've been behind the parents and protected back there were brought to the front of the line so they could see Jesus and maybe get a blessing - you know how these politicians like to hold babies and give them a kiss around election time - hoping that Jesus might bend down and kiss their child, the messiah, the great hope of Israel is coming to town.

Zacchaeus hears the word and comes out of his palace to see what's going on and maybe to just catch a glimpse of this Jesus. But the people of Jericho find themselves in a very unique position with Zacchaeus. They let the children through, but when Zacchaeus, who can't see over the shoulder of the average man in town, wants to get a view of Jesus, they suddenly close ranks and you can hear the crowd laughing, snickering because they know they got him right where they want him. They're going to keep him out. And Zacchaeus is trying to worm his way in - and I mean worm in all the sense of that word. And finally Zacchaeus, who is a very intelligent man, seizes an opportunity, a tree and no one is guarding it. He quickly runs over to the sycamore tree, he climbs up and there is Jesus. Jesus in the midst of this huge crowd with children all around and people's eyes filled with hope that things are going to change and they're going to change for the good and God's reign will continue again and our people.

Jesus looks up to the sycamore tree and he says these words, "Zacchaeus, hurry, come down; for I must stay in your home." How dare Jesus do this? It's an insult to the people of

Jericho. Who does he think he is? He's suppose to free us and have nothing to do with him. Why isn't he saying, "Bring a rope; throw it over the tallest branch of that sycamore tree; let's lynch him right here and we're send Rome a message they won't forget." But instead, Jesus is saying, "Zacchaeus."

Do you know what the name Zacchaeus means? Laura knows because I told her before worship; you have the inside track. The name Zacchaeus means the righteous or pure one. And the people of Jericho knew that Zacchaeus was anything but righteous and pure. And so when they spoke his name it was a curse – Zacchaeus. But Jesus looked Zacchaeus in the eyes. No one else in Jericho looked Zacchaeus in the eyes. But Jesus looked Zacchaeus in the eyes and saw all the way to his soul. And he called him righteous and pure one.

Did you notice Jesus did nothing; didn't lay hands on Zacchaeus; didn't tell Zacchaeus you've got to change; didn't put mud in his eyes; didn't pray over him; didn't say get up and walk – all he said was, "Zacchaeus" while looking him in the eye. And in that moment Zacchaeus remembered who he was. He remembered that his parents had given him that name for a purpose - to live as a righteous and pure child of Israel. In that very moment just by saying his name, Jesus revealed to this man what he was and what he had become. And it was a transformational moment for him. Jesus said, "Hurry and come down" and Zacchaeus couldn't get down fast enough. Jesus said, "I must stay at your place" and suddenly there is a feast set for Jesus and his followers and the transformation becomes evident. If there's anyone I've cheated, I will return four-fold. I'm going to cease doing these unethical, immoral business practices. Oh, if Bernie Madoff had only met Jesus! We laugh at that, but if he had only met Jesus his life would've been transformed for the good and the suffering would not have of been as bad for those who were bilked out of their retirements. Oh, if those guys on Wall Street only met Jesus, they would know the right thing to do for people trying to buy a home.

Now Sue, I have to take issue with you. You said Zacchaeus became a giant. This is the only mention of his name in the Gospels and this is the only Gospel that mentions his name. And my guess is Zacchaeus became a nobody which made him a giant. And the people of Jericho hopefully got the message. For you see if they had lynched him that day on that sycamore tree; if indeed Jesus had exacted that kind of justice, all it would've done was to bring more tyranny, greater taxes, a heavier burden to the children and to the

families of Jericho. But instead, Jesus allowed the grace and the love of God to transform Zacchaeus' life so there might be relief for the people.

Who knows? Maybe Zacchaeus stayed in the tax collecting business, but maybe now he's cut back his percentage way back to what he needs and not this wealth that he wants. And who knows? He had several tax collectors working for him and maybe he started telling them to do the same. Who knows? We do not know what happened to Zacchaeus. We do not know what happened to the people of Jericho. We just have this story today that reminds us that every time we find ourselves with that mob mentality that says, "Lynch him and let's exact our own justice," that there is a God with a higher justice that calls us to live as people of God's justice. And Jesus is the one whose life has become our life together. And we thank and we praise God Almighty for that precious gift that saves us today and saves us for eternity.

Thanks be to God.