

Zacchaeus and His Tree

Luke 19:1-10

November 22, 2020

The house I lived in when I was young had a small front yard with an outdoor pump, a doghouse, and two lilac trees. They were bushes but they grew tall like trees and had very strong perfume smell flowers in spring. I still remember the smell when I think of spring. They were the only trees I got to know when I grew up. But one day my mom or dad put a plastic gasoline container around the trees and a branch or a stone punctured the container. Over the night gasoline leaked into the ground and killed both trees. They were dead and standing there for a while. That's only one personal and intimate memory that I have with trees until we moved here. I heard that our church ground was a tree farm. Some long-time members told me that over the years we lost many trees. But we still have many different types of trees. Living in the parsonage surrounded by all these trees, our family feels like we live in a park rather than a church ground. During this pandemic I spend more time walking around it, checking out every corner of it and visiting trees of it. I decided to get to know our trees. How do you get to know trees? I thought I needed to hug them to get to know them. I did, but it didn't work. I didn't feel much anything when I hugged them. I talked them and it didn't work. I touched them, and it didn't work either. One day I tried to lean on them in gentle silence. And it work. That day I leaned on about ten to fifteen trees and found one tree whom I felt it accepted me and embraced me as who I am. Now I have my tree out there who knows me. To get to know a tree is happiness. I think children get to know trees best by climbing up on them. That's why children and trees become friends easily.

There was a boy whose name was Zacchaeus. He had a tree as his best friend. He came to the tree everyday and gathered her leaves. He made them into crowns and played king of the forest. He climbed up her trunk and sat on her branches. And when he was tired, he slept in her shade. The boy loved the tree, and the tree was happy. Does it sound familiar to you? Yes, it is a part of the book "Giving Tree." I see Zacchaeus whose story we just heard in the Gospel reading in this story of "Giving Tree." Time went by and the boy, Zacchaeus, grew older. He became a tax collector. People didn't like him and called him names though he didn't do anything wrong. He didn't collect more money than he was supposed to do. Because he worked there for many years, rather than switching jobs, he became a chief tax collector. He was rich. But he didn't misuse his power. Collecting tax and managing his office was his job. But people hated him, and no one wanted to be his friend. He was lonely and the tree was still his only friend.

One day he heard that Jesus was passing through his town, Jericho. He wanted to see him. There was a big crowd. Because he was short it was hard to see Jesus. But that was not a problem for him. He had his tree to climb up. Like a child he climbed up the tree and sat on a trunk of his tree and waited to see Jesus. And there comes Jesus! When Jesus comes to his tree he looks up and says, "Zacchaeus come down at once. I must stay at your home today."

Can you imagine how Zacchaeus might have felt when Jesus called his name (Jesus called his real name, not calling names) and wanted to stay at his home to eat and to enjoy the night with him? Zacchaeus ran down the tree at once and was happy to welcome Jesus. Everyone who saw this grumbled and said, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner." People were not happy for neither Zacchaeus nor Jesus. Only his tree was happy for them. So, she waved her branches and dropped her leaves on them like confetti. Zacchaeus is the happiest man in the world. Now Jesus knows him and treats him as his friend. In that happy moment, he realizes that he has enough and he himself is enough to be loved and accepted as who he is. He lacks nothing. He is grateful for everything, especially for Jesus who comes to him like an unexpected gift. He becomes whole, a wholesome human being. What else can any human expect,

experience and achieve better than becoming whole, whole with God, whole with humanity and whole with him or herself? It is true happiness.

Before they entered his house, Zacchaeus stops Jesus and says to him, "Look, Lord, I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." What a shock it is! We are shocked to hear it not because of the amount of the money he is willing to give up or he is repenting finally. Some people may think, Oh, finally the sinner is repenting. Yes, everyone has something to repent, not just Zacchaeus. But before he mentions any repayment or repent, he says he gives out half of his possession to the poor! Why? No law requires him to give out half of his possessions. If it is not a religious or legal duty, why does he give out half of his possession? Does he do it because he is rich, and he can live with half of his possession? Maybe. How about you and me? If we give out half of our possessions, can we live with the other half? Maybe. Then, what is different between Zacchaeus and you and me? I believe you and I think we don't have enough for us and for our children no matter how much or how less we have, and we hold onto what we have. But Zacchaeus thinks he has enough, and he is enough with whatever he has. I do not say it easily. I am one of you. I am like most of you who think we are never enough.

When he was a little boy, Zacchaeus learned something from his tree that it was OK without many toys or many friends. Just one, a tree, was enough for him to be happy. Later when he meets Jesus, he realizes it again that he is enough because of one person, Jesus who knows him and accepts him as who he is. To be known by Jesus means salvation. And it means everything for Zacchaeus. He lacks nothing. When we know we lack nothing we become a wholesome human being who is grateful always. As a fully human he says, "if I have cheated anyone, I repay them four times as much." He was not sure whether he cheated someone or not. He just wants to do a right thing. Here, his willingness to repay is not a legal or religious duty or guilt. It is his humility recognizing he is a member of human family. Everyone sins. We are all sinners. As a member of human family, he recognizes that he is a sinner no matter he cheated or not. People who called him a sinner or other names didn't have humility to know that they are the equal members of humanity.

In front of Zacchaeus' house Jesus says to him, "Today, salvation has come to this household because he too is a son of Abraham." Salvation is from Jesus and our response to his gift of salvation is being grateful every moment of our life and living generously because we too are the children of Abraham. Thanks be to God.