

An Elevated Perspective
Luke 19:1-10
September 29, 2019
First Presbyterian, Luling

My parents have lived in the same house since 1975. Connie, their neighbor across the street, has lived in her house even longer. Our families have been friends, though more the parents than the kids, since Connie's kids are older than me and my brother. Connie is a wonderful friend and neighbor. We have had an open invitation to swim in her pool for our whole lives, and now our kids do too. Connie's husband died long ago, and my dad regularly is called upon to fix her computer or light fixture or other little projects. In what will be pertinent to the story in a minute, you will need to know that Connie is six feet tall.

When Andy and I got married, we registered for gifts at Dillard's and Target. Dillard's, in 1997, retained the old fashioned process of walking through the china, crystal, and linens sections with a clipboard and pen and writing down what you wanted to register for. Then the helpful clerk would transcribe your list to the computer and suggest items you had missed. The fun wedding gift registration expedition was to Target. It was the first year that Target had allowed couples to roam the store with our very own scanner gun and scan items into a list that magically appeared on their computer kiosks. Now, you could do this from the comfort of your own living room, but it was pretty amazing. And scan bar codes we did—all kinds of kitchen items and normal wedding registry things. Then it occurred to us that we could scan anything in the store and someone might buy it for us as

a gift. One of the things in this category was a step stool. Andy didn't understand—you might have noticed he's quite a bit taller than I am, but I thought it was a vital piece of equipment for anyone's home. My own house growing up had a kitchen step stool that is still there, and it gets used probably every day. We needed this stool.

And we got the stool. And the person who bought us the stool was six-foot-tall Connie the across the street neighbor. She did not own a step stool herself, because why would she need one? She could reach the top shelf of the top cabinet without even tippy-toeing. I always thought it was funny, ironic, that tall Connie understood that short Monica would need a stool. I guess that's why I remember that she's the one that bought it for us, that and I use it all the time.

Some of you will identify with me in feeling a little short sometimes, in need of a stepstool more than occasionally. Those of you who complain about lack of leg room on airplanes probably don't really know what I mean. Avery Johnson will always be my favorite Spurs player, though he left the team in 2001. He is only 5'10", which is still well above my head, but he sure looked short among the rest of them. Let's just say I have an affinity for the short guys. You can probably connect the dots about why I love the story of Zacchaeus in the Gospel of Luke. After all, Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he. He must not have had a handy stepstool, because he climbed up in the sycamore tree to see the Lord. But stop for a minute right there.

I can't resist sharing this little tidbit with you, though I don't know where to go with it or if it really

makes any difference to the story. In Greek, and in the English translation, if you don't have that mental image of Zacchaeus up in the sycamore, it isn't clear who it is that is too short. Listen to the description again: "He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature."

The first he is Zacchaeus—the Greek grammar as well as the English refers back to the previous sentence. So Zacchaeus is trying to see Jesus, but the crowd is in the way, because he was short in stature. Because Zacchaeus was short in stature? That's what we've always assumed. But it is equally possible grammatically that it is because Jesus is short in stature. Or even both of them. Short people trying to see other short people in a crowd is one of life's more frustrating experiences. If

Jesus were particularly short, it makes several passages make sense, where he disappeared into the crowds.

It doesn't really matter which one of them were short, because Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus and can't see Jesus, so he climbs the sycamore tree. I also don't know why Luke tells us what kind of tree it is. He needs another perspective. I remember when the kids were toddlers, I would read safety experts who advised parents to crawl around the house, to see potential dangers that only someone crawling on the floor could spot. And it worked. It's amazing what you see that is otherwise invisible, and how you categorize what you see.

Zacchaeus knows something about Jesus. It's clear that he has heard of Jesus. And he greatly desires to see Jesus, though we don't hear why that is. Does he want

just to see Jesus? Does he want Jesus to notice him up there in the tree? Does he want the crowd to notice him or is he trying to hide behind the sycamore's leafy branches? Not surprisingly, because he is the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus is not popular or well-liked or trusted by the crowd. There are so many questions that Luke hints at but does not answer.

Zacchaeus gets an elevated perspective, up in the sycamore tree, and whether Zacchaeus had intended this or not, Jesus notices him up there. "Get down, Zacchaeus, because I'm coming to your house for supper." I often wonder what Mrs. Zacchaeus's reaction to this news was, assuming that she was still at home, already making preparations for the meal that would now have at least one extra eater. But Zacchaeus himself is delighted, happy, just like the woman who

finds her lost coin and the shepherd who finds his lost sheep. Zacchaeus has been found by Jesus, has been noticed by Jesus, and this is an occasion for joy.

The passage that Janey read is nowhere near as familiar as the Zacchaeus story, and I suppose the lectionary designers chose it because it also describes someone who needed an elevated perspective to see God. In the midst of wickedness and evil and bad news and destruction and violence and wrongdoing, Habakkuk decides to climb the watchtower—whether this is a metaphor or a real watchtower who knows and it doesn't really matter—Habakkuk decides to climb the watchtower and wait for God's response. He gets a new perspective by going to a new location, a perspective that allows him to disagree and discuss and wait for God's response and God's action.

People who teach preaching often tell students to not read their Bible in the same place every day. They challenge students to go to different rooms in their own homes—the kitchen or the living room, or to different places in their community—the coffee shop or public library, and read their preaching passage in those different places. It's interesting how you notice different things and gain a different perspective just by your surroundings and the people around you.

The end of the Zacchaeus story is full of more question marks. The sequence is this: Jesus invites himself over to Zacchaeus's house, the crowd grumbles about Jesus doing that because he's hanging out with sinners again, Zacchaeus says he's repaying anything he's cheated and then some, then Jesus says salvation has come to his house. We can draw a bunch of

conclusions about what action led to the next action, but we would be speculating.

Most people speculate regarding Zacchaeus repaying what he has cheated. But the translation is tricky. It can equally say that Zacchaeus is already and will continue those repayments, or that he will start the repayments. You can see how that changes the interpretation. If simply seeing Jesus and being seen by Jesus has inspired Zacchaeus to repaying those he has wronged, then it's a significant moment. If Zacchaeus has already been doing these repayments, then it is the crowd who has misunderstood Zacchaeus, who was more righteous than they had imagined.

And if Jesus saying "salvation has come to your house today" is conditional on Zacchaeus's repayments, as a kind of repentance, then what would have

happened if Jesus hadn't seen Zacchaeus up in that tree? Would he have not received salvation? What if Zacchaeus hadn't repaid the cheating? Would he have not received salvation then? I'm not sure we can draw a lot of conclusions about forgiveness and repentance and salvation from Zacchaeus's story, because there's too much going on to make it a clear process.

And maybe that's the point after all. Salvation isn't a clear process, it isn't linear, step one doesn't automatically lead to steps two and three. The bare bones of the story are that Zacchaeus seeks out Jesus. Jesus seeks out Zacchaeus. And salvation in the person of Jesus comes to Zacchaeus's house.

Zacchaeus does what it takes, whatever it takes, to get a different perspective so that he can see Jesus and so that Jesus can see him. Which makes me wonder

what kind of different perspective or position do we need to find, so that we can see Jesus more clearly and Jesus can see us—or maybe so that we can see Jesus seeing us, because I believe Jesus can see us no matter where we are. What do we need to change so that we can see Jesus more clearly, and so that we can see that Jesus sees us? Do we need to go to different places? Talk to different people? Talk differently to the same people? Listen differently to different people? Listen differently to the same people we see all the time? Hush up and listen for God's response like Habakkuk?

Jesus's last line, "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost," is good news. Jesus saw and sought out and saved Zacchaeus, and Jesus does the same for us.