

“Tree-Climbing Lessons”

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Luke 19:1-10

When I was a little girl, we had several weeping willow trees in the apartment complex where I lived. In the summer, day after day, I would lose time climbing those trees. I would grab the first branch with my hands, and flipping upside down, swing my feet to the branch, wrapping my legs around it so I could pull my body up. From there, I would climb, branch to branch, stretching my body so it was long like the trunk of the tree. I would climb high enough that it would make me nervous now to be a mother seeing her young child climb so high. But I was not afraid; it was like my body was grafted onto the tree. And the view was amazing! Though I was somewhat hidden by the long, weeping branches and leaves of the tree, I could see out around me. I would survey the apartment complex to see what was happening: who was playing kickball in grass at the center of the apartment buildings, or who was at the pool. Or sometimes I would just survey the birds and squirrels in the nearby trees, wondering what they thought about while they were up in those branches.

I'm pretty sure Zacchaeus must have climbed trees when he was younger. People who don't have any experience climbing trees as kids are most likely not people who, as adults, would see a tree and think-- there's a way I can get a better view. Maybe as a kid he climbed by himself, or maybe he climbed with the other neighborhood children in Jericho, when they weren't kicking a ball together or playing hide-and-go seek. When I read about Jericho in the time of Jesus, I find that it was a city with lots of rich and powerful people in it. Herod the Great kept his winter palace there, because it had warm weather and lots of freshwater springs-- an oasis where much of the surrounding land was desert. At the same time, because there were so many people with lots of money living there, it was where beggars camped out and lined the streets with hopes that the rich would throw some change their way. Since children often play together, regardless of how much money their parents make, Zacchaeus probably grew up alongside the rich kids, and the poor kids-- kids like Bartimaeus, who was born blind.

As a tax collector, the grown-up Zacchaeus went back and forth between the groups he played with as a child: the rich, and the poor. From the poor, Zacchaeus took the

required Roman tax, and brought it to the rich, so that the rich could get richer. Not only that, but it was common at the time for tax collectors to take a little-- or a lot-- extra so they could start to make their own fortunes. Zacchaeus saw how the rich lived; who could blame him for wanting to become one of them?

Well, the kids he grew up with, climbing trees and playing ball, probably did. Because he had been one of them too. How could he live with himself, trying to take away the money they needed to feed their families and earn a decent living? It seemed that he was lost to them.

Well, Zacchaeus had heard Jesus telling stories about lost people and things. He heard the story of the woman who had ten silver coins, and lost one, and swept the whole house until she found it. The joy and delight when she found it was so big, that she threw a party and invited all her friends to celebrate its recovery. Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus' story of the lost sheep-- how the shepherd who had 100 sheep left the 99 to find that one lost lamb. He threw a party too, telling his neighbors to rejoice with him that this lost sheep was found. And then there was the father, whose son left with his inheritance, spending it all with nothing to show for it. When that son returned, the father threw a party, rejoicing that what was lost, is now found.

Maybe I am lost and need to be found too, Zacchaeus wondered to himself. He remembered playing hide-and-go-seek with his childhood friends, and how the fun of the game comes when someone who was hidden is found. He decided that day that he wanted to be found.

Jesus was walking through town, Zacchaeus knew. And so he followed the crowds to see if this wise man could show him the way to being found. And yet, all those people swarming around him-- the kids he had grown up with-- had grown so much taller than him. He jumped to see over their shoulders. But he could not see a thing! As he looked around, he saw the old sycamore tree that he used to climb as a child, with his friends. Quickly, he grabbed the lowest branch, which like his hands had grown thicker with years. With a little more effort it took than when he was a child, Zacchaeus swung himself onto the lowest branch.

Then he saw him. Jesus. Would today be the day that he was found?