

ARE WE UP A TREE OR IN THE WAY?
Sermon for Pentecost 24C (Proper 26) - Lk 19:1-10
LPC, 10/30/16

Tax collectors. Again.

Today we have yet another story from Luke about tax collectors. I spoke about tax collectors last week. As you recall, I described tax collectors in Jesus' day as despised collaborators, because tax collectors served the hated Roman overlords.

Now, I don't know what you think of when you hear the word "collaborators," but I am put in mind of a photograph I have seen once was taken in France at the conclusion of the Second World War. Two women with shaved heads and ragged clothes were being taunted by their neighbors in the street. They had been identified as *collaborateuses*. Their crime was to have had love affairs with German soldiers.

The image is intensely disturbing. But the photo shows graphically the cruelty to which people often resort when they feel they have been betrayed by one of their own.

Zacchaeus' neighbors seem to have felt the same way about him as those French people felt about the *collaborateuses*. Do you think the people around Zacchaeus were deliberately blocking his view of Jesus, to passive-aggressively show their disapproval of him? I suspect so. Having to climb a tree seems a rather extreme response unless there was some deliberate blockage going on. The people's outrage that Jesus singles Zacchaeus out for the favor of a house call suggests some pretty strong antipathy on their part.

Jesus does not see Zacchaeus as the crowd does. Jesus looks at Zacchaeus and sees not a lowlife collaborator but a person, an individual with a name and feelings and a soul worth saving. Jesus sees this in Zacchaeus where others see only a traitor worth obstructing and complaining about.

Zacchaeus' response to Jesus' humane treatment is remarkable. He repents of using his position for his own gain and volunteers to make restitution at something like double the amount required by law. And "salvation comes to his house."

Sometimes we are like Zacchaeus. Our "view" of Jesus has been blocked either by circumstances, or by the actions of other people. When we are in this situation we would do well to follow Zacchaeus' example and take steps to restore our "view" of Jesus. Sometimes, as with Zacchaeus, this means we must "rise above" our own limited perspective.

Spiritually we can change our perspective by, I don't know, praying for a change in perspective. One prayer I know contains the phrase, "Lift us up, that we may see clearly." This is the kind of prayer I am talking about: to be raised above our own limited awareness.

Other times our perspective is restored by spending time along with God with no agenda but to wait on God. This is what meditation is all about. And it works.

Sometimes we can get a new perspective by talking honestly with someone we trust.

And sometimes, the best way to get a new spiritual perspective is to voluntarily place ourselves in another's position. When I talk to people who are hurting, they sometimes will tell me, "When I start to feel sorry for myself, I think of all the people who are worse off than I am." Do you ever do that? That works too.

This is one of the lessons we can take from identifying with Zacchaeus. When we feel we have lost sight of Jesus, when our faith feels lost or weak, a change of perspective may be needed to restore Jesus to front and center in our awareness.

But I think Luke tells this story not only to the Zacchaeuses among us but to those of us who are in the crowd: those who crowd out other people's view of Jesus. And I think most of us do this, consciously or unconsciously, from time to time.

Elsewhere in the Gospels Jesus has harsh words for those who put obstacles in the way of other people's faith, or who make judgments about who may have access to Jesus, or who grumble when others are singled out to be blessed by Jesus. For God's sake, let us not be like the crowd in this story. Whatever else we do in life, let us not through our actions obstruct other people's view of God.

And now, a change in perspective:

Today we baptize Stella Eloise Nicely. We will vow in a few minutes to do a very un-crowd-like thing: We vow to do the very opposite of what the crowd around Zacchaeus did. We vow not to close off Stella's view of Jesus. As a matter of fact, we vow to do whatever we can to make sure Stella sees Jesus, not only by teaching her about Jesus, but by acting out the Jesus way of life. That is what it means to "support this person in her life in Christ."

As baptized persons ourselves, this is our job description. Never to block a person's view of Christ, but actually to facilitate that person's view of Christ but by living the Jesus way of life. We try to live, work and pray that Christ may live, work and pray through us.

Dear God, when people see us, may they see you in us.