Sunday November 23, 1980

"THE PROBLEM OF BEING SHORT" Luke 19:1-10

There's one sentence in the story of Zacchaeus that's very revealing--listen to it again. "He sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd because he was small of stature." In plain language, he was too short to see above the crowd.

Those of us who are a little taller than average, like me, might first have some difficulty identifying with the problem of being too short. When we sit in a chair of any average size, our feet reach the floor. When we are in a crowd, it's not too difficult for us to see what we want to see. But what we forget is that each one of us is too short in one way or another. We may be tall physically, but short in other ways.

Some of us are short on talent. We may have trouble carrying a tune when singing, or trouble speaking in public, or acting in a drama production. Others are convinced that they are short on intelligence, they could never understand higher mathematics or nuclear physics. And there are those who see themselves as being short on looks. They do not consider themselves handsome or beautiful. Still others are short on athletic ability. No matter how much they practice at a particular sport, there is little improvement.

There are those who are short on personality or short on understanding or sensitivity. Some are short on positive thoughts and always tend to see only the negative side of any issue. Some people are short on action. They have trouble getting started and following through. And there are those who are short on love; they find difficulty in giving love and in receiving love, and still others are short on friends. Since we are at the beginning of Thanksgiving week, there are also those who are short on gratitude. They do not see very much to be thankful for.

Each one of us has the problem of being short in one way or another. Recognizing that we are short is one thing doing something about it is something else. We usually handle our problem of being short in one of three ways. There are three choices. Zacchaeus had three choices.

1. First, Zacchaeus could've stayed firmly on the ground and done nothing about his problem. That would've been the safest thing to do. Perhaps if he tried hard enough, he might have been able to get a peek through the crowd and see Jesus as he passed by. He could've said to himself, "Why make any special effort. I'm too short and that's that. I'll just feel sorry for myself and do nothing."

Those of us who handle our problem of being short in this way usually find all sorts of excuses to justify our inaction. We have a disadvantage complex and we tell ourselves such things as: "I'm too old to make any changes." The truth is, one is never too old to change unless one gives up. Only when one reaches a point of not caring anymore, then and only then, is one too old.

Or we might say to ourselves, "I'm handicapped by my being too short, and it's no use to try to do anything about it." The most serious handicap anyone of us can have is to always give up: to do nothing!

2. A second way Zacchaeus could've handled his problem of being short would've been to get a box and stand on it so that he would've been as tall as the rest of the crowd. Then he would've been at least average and would not stand out in any way. He would be on the same level with all the others. If he had done this, there would still be little risk involved. Instead of doing nothing, he would have been doing something--but not too much.

He could have at least seen Jesus as he passed by just as anyone else could. He would've been one of the crowd. There's some safety in just being one of the crowd, in being average. We don't have to stick our neck out or go out on a limb. There's not much risk involved.

3. The third choice which Zacchaeus had was to get above the ground and above the crowd and for him that meant climbing a tree and literally going out on a limb. And when you are out on a limb, you are visible. You can be seen by everyone. In the case of Zacchaeus, it meant that Jesus couldn't miss him. In fact Jesus invited himself to his home and when Jesus comes into your home, some changes are going to be made. In the situation with Zacchaeus, going out on a limb, changed his whole life. He was never

the same again. That's what happens when you decide to overcome your being short in whatever way you are short.

I read about a man in Sioux City, Iowa, who at the age of 18, was one of the most accomplished violinists in that area. Then a terrible accident happened in his father's blacksmith shop. A red hot iron fell on his left hand. The four fingers that touched the strings of his violin were cut off! Only his thumb remained on his mutilated hand. Short? Not in his thinking! He determined to learn to play the violin left-handed. And he did, holding the bow in his mutilated hand. He became a prominent violinist in the Sioux City, Iowa, symphony.

In a similar fashion, a blind person said, "I thought when I lost my sight I would be doomed to unhappiness. Now I have discovered that I am happier without my sight. Most of my unhappy thoughts came through my eyes. I saw new styles and became dis-satisfied with what I had. I saw handsome faces of other people and was dis-satisfied with my own looks. And I discovered that most joy-producing thoughts come into people's minds in the dark anyway. Don't you close your eyes when you kiss the one you love? Don't you close your eyes when you listen to good music? Don't you close your eyes when you pray?"

The violin player and the blind person both found ways to handle their problem of being short. They didn't just stay on the ground and give up. Neither did they give in to being average.

Each one of us, like Zacchaeus and others, can overcome our problem of being short, no matter in what aspect of our lives that shortness appears. But it usually means going out on a limb in some fashion. It means not being afraid to take a risk. It means not being afraid of change.

Church congregations often react in one of the three ways I've mentioned. Each congregation has one of three choices. It can be below average and do nothing about it. It can plant its feet firmly on the ground for stability and occasionally through its crowded life get a glimpse of Jesus Christ as he passes by. A church can play it safe and never stick its neck out or go out on a limb and its members feel comfortable and secure in being below average.

Or a church can take the second choice and step up a couple of inches and become one of the crowd so that when people think of all the churches in their community, your church name is just one of the many, only average.

But the third choice for the church and for this congregation, is the same one that Zacchaeus made. That choice is to stand for something, to climb a tree and go out on a limb, to not be afraid to be seen or criticized. I believe that First-Plymouth is that kind of congregation. We want Jesus Christ to invite himself into our life just as he did in the life of Zacchaeus.

I hope that as individuals and as a congregation we will continue to make the kind of choice that Zacchaeus made--to not be afraid to strive for excellence in all that we do.

George Bernard Shaw attended a concert given by the violinist Heifitz. He wrote the following note when he got home: "My dear Mr. Heifitz: My wife and I were overwhelmed by your concert. If you continue to play with such beauty, you will certainly die young. No one can play with such perfection without provoking the jealousy of the gods. I earnestly implore you to play something badly every night before going to bed. . ."

To pursue excellence is to stick one's neck out or go out on a limb as did Zacchaeus. It does provoke jealousy on the part of the gods of this world, but not on the part of the God of all creation.

We all have the problem of being short in one way or another and it's up to us as to how we handle it. I believe that Jesus Christ wants us to take the third choice and climb a tree and go out on a limb--to climb above the average, to overcome our handicaps. I believe that in this thanksgiving season God wants us to overcome our shortness on gratitude and to give thanks in all things.

The incredible good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ is that when we begin to go out on a limb like Zacchaeus, when we make the first move toward change, toward taking a risk, then the power of God comes along to help us. That's the way Jesus always helps people. He believes in our possibilities and in our potential and when he meets anyone

who is willing to change or trying to change such as Zacchaeus, he gives that person his power so that we are no longer lifting ourselves by our own bootstraps, but we are being lifted. That's why St. Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Here is the difference between humanism or moralism and the Christian Gospel. Both seek to help people to change for the better, to rise above the average, to go out on a limb, to take the risk. The humanist or moralist has to tell the individual that in the end, he or she must somehow change himself, while the Christian faith promises us that through Christ, we find ourselves in a new relationship to God, to eternal spiritual forces so that we are being changed when we give ourselves over to these spiritual forces.

No one of us need stay where he or she is. We can be changed as Zacchaeus was changed, but it does require us to take the risk and go out on a limb.

Here's a quick little test to help you discover what your inner attitude is so that you will know whether or not you are at present the kind of person who is willing to make the third choice as did Zacchaeus to overcome his problem of being short.

— 1. Do you look for reasons why something can't be done instead of searching for ways in which it can be done?
— 2. Do you tend to resist new ideas and prefer to do things the way you've always done them?
— 3. Do you have a tendency to move ahead only when you have every single fact?
— 4. Do you demand a guarantee of success before you begin?
— 5. Do you imagine the opposition you might encounter before you imagine the support you might expect?
— 6. Do you ever turn down an idea simply because you don't like it, or because your mind is already made up or because you've made other plans?
— 7. Do you close your mind to a suggestion before hearing the full explanation?
— 8. Do you point out the disadvantages in an idea before you point out the advantages?
— 9. If you can't imagine a solution to a problem, are you inclined to turn away from it?

10. Do you believe that human nature cannot really be altered? That a person's life cannot be changed?

If you answer yes to very many of these questions, you are going to have difficulty overcoming your problem of being short.

I hope you will this morning begin to overcome whatever problem of being short that is in your life. I hope in particular you will overcome the problem of being short in gratitude. Begin today to act grateful and you will in fact become a thankful person.

Begin this day to make the changes in your life that you have always wanted to make and once you begin, God will be in your life to help you and you will discover a power that you've never felt before. Amen.