Sunday November 2, 1986
GOOD NEWS FOR SHORT PEOPLE
Luke 19:1-10

Most of us have our favorite stories from the Bible. One of my favorites is the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus, just read from the Gospel of Luke. It is filled with revealing details. For example, “He (that is Zacchaeus) 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.

What else do we know about Zacchaeus in addition to his being short? Luke tells us that “he was a chief tax collector and rich.” That’s all we know — three things — he was short, a chief tax collector, and rich. Yet there’s one thing more: he was curious. He wanted to see who Jesus was.

Why? Was it his conscience? Or was he searching for more in life? Maybe he wanted to be treated just once like a human being? Perhaps he had heard the rumor that Jesus spent time eating with tax collectors and sinners. But the crowd was too large, and he was too short to even see Jesus. And we can assume that he was not well-liked by those in the crowd who knew him. In their judgment, he was not to be rated among decent people but with cut-throats and robbers, with adulterers and brothel-keepers; an informer, a traitor both to his nation and to its ancient faith in the one God.

Yet “he wanted to see who Jesus was, but could not, on account of the crowd, because he was small of stature.”

Those of us who are a little taller than average, like me, might first have some difficulty identifying with those who are shorter. 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. In fact, the problem of being a little taller than average is that we sometimes stand out when we don’t want to be noticed. Tall people cannot hide as easily as short people.

However, what all of us forget, whether we are physically tall or small in stature, is that each one of us is too short in one way or another.

Some of us are short on talent. We may have trouble carrying a tune when singing, speaking in public, or acting in a drama production. Others are convinced that they are short on personality or short on understanding or sensitivity.

Still others are sure that they are short on intelligence. They could never understand computers, higher mathematics, or nuclear physics. And there are those who consider themselves short on looks. They do not see themselves as handsome or beautiful. Still, others believe that they are short on athletic ability. No matter how much they practice at a particular sport, there is little improvement.

There are people who are short on positive thoughts and long on negative ones. Some people are short on action. They have trouble getting started and following through. We talk about our “shortcomings.”

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.

If you feel short in any one of these ways, or in some other way not mentioned, then the story of Zacchaeus is also a story about you. Recognizing that we are short is one thing, but doing something about it is something else.

We usually handle our problem about being short in one of three ways. Zacchaeus had three choices.

First, he could've stayed firmly on the ground and done nothing about his problem. That would've been the safest and easiest 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. Nobody in this crowd likes me, so I'm sure Jesus wouldn't like me either."
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 make changes 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 any one of us can have is to always give up — to do nothing.

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've at least seen Jesus as he passed by just as anyone else could. He would've been one of the crowd; there's a certain safety in being one of the crowd. We don't have to stick our neck out or go out on a limb.

The third choice 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. When you are out on a limb, you are visible and vulnerable. In the case of Zacchaeus, it meant that Jesus couldn't miss him and his enemies couldn't miss him either.

"And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said, 'Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.'" Notice especially the response of Zacchaeus when Jesus invited himself into his life. "He made haste and came down and received him joyfully."

Never in his wildest dreams did Zacchaeus imagine that Jesus would invite himself to stay at his house and eat at his table. He simply wanted to see who Jesus was. Never in the world would he have summoned up enough courage to extend such an invitation. Zacchaeus knew his shortcomings and did not think of himself as being worthy enough to have Jesus, or anyone else for that matter, as his guest. In addition to being small of stature, he was short on self-esteem.

But when we go out on a limb, as did Zacchaeus, wonderful surprises come our way. When we take the first step, make the first move toward change; when we are willing to take the risk and go out on a limb, we are in effect opening the door for God to come into our lives in a fresh way. That's one of the ways in which Jesus 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 the first part of the good news for all of us short people — God in Christ chooses us. We only have to be ready to accept the invitation from God — to be open to the invitation. If we are open, then Jesus, as in the case of Zacchaeus, invites himself into our lives.

The second part of the good news for all of us who are short in any way is that God does not evaluate us in the same way that we evaluate each other. God sees us differently.

For example, one of the most highly valued personal attributes in our culture and in many others is physical attractiveness — beauty. Accordingly, the personal worth of a newborn baby is often anxiously judged by his or her parents and others as they examine the baby's body and its accessories.

This distorted system of evaluating human worth according to physical attractiveness is widespread. Some years ago, in Chicago, eight student nurses were viciously murdered. The following day, a commentator was discussing the violent event on the radio and he said, "The thing that makes this tragedy much worse is that all eight of these girls were so attractive." He was implying that the young women were more valuable human beings because of their beauty.

If one accepts that statement, then the opposite is also true: The murders would have been less tragic if homely young women were involved. There's a song that goes, "A pretty girl is like a melody." What's a not-so-pretty girl like?

Very early in life, most children begin to learn the social importance of physical beauty. Many children are able then to determine the relative worth of their own physical arrangement by the time they enter kindergarten. Recently, I heard a 36-year-old man say, "I was five years old when I realized that I was ugly, and I've never been the same since."

The Christian faith, however, continually underscores the fact that all human beings are created worthy and have the right to personal respect and dignity. And that's the way Jesus treated people. Zacchaeus is an example. Cultural values are not God's values. God sees us differently. So Jesus said to Zacchaeus, a man who didn't like himself very much and a person who was not liked by others, "Make haste, for I must stay at your house today."

Looks, intelligence, family background, color of skin, how tall or short a person is — we have many ways of judging people and ourselves — but God sees us differently.

Some time ago, I heard of a father who finally came to realize this as he was going through adoption procedures for a baby.

"I realized," he said, "that I was inspecting and evaluating this child as if I were buying a new automobile. I was actually asking if this baby girl was qualified to become my daughter. I

suddenly comprehended that the infant lying there before me was a magnificent creation, regardless of any flaws or disadvantages. She was the creation of God who had given her an immortal soul, yet I stood there demanding a perfect child who could become a personal credit to me."

God's way of looking at human beings was made very clear more than 3,000 years ago when the prophet Samuel was seeking a king for Israel. Samuel was about to select the tallest, the most handsome son of Jesse, but God told him he had chosen the wrong person. According to the story in the Old Testament, God said, "Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, for God sees not as you see. You look on the outward appearance, but God looks inward, on the person's intentions."

This is good news for all of us. God sees through us! God does not judge as we judge. God looks past our shortcomings. And more than that, God heals us. God makes us new.

Once Jesus was in the house of Zacchaeus and they had dinner together, Zacchaeus began to become a changed person. To be sure, he was still small of stature physically, but that was no longer important. Now he knew he was forgiven and loved by God.

And once we know that, we can love and be loved by others. Then salvation has come to our house too. That's good news for all of us, no matter in what way we are short. Amen.