Sunday, October 31, 2004
THE PROBLEM OF BEING SHORT
Luke 19:1-10

I've never personally known anyone named Zacchaeus. That's because it has never been a popular name. It's never been on the preferred list of names that parents choose for baby boys in today's world or in times past. On the other hand, the story of Zacchaeus in Luke's gospel has always been one of my favorites.

What do we know about him? Luke gives these details. He was short. He was a chief tax collector. He was rich. He was curious. He wanted to see who Jesus was. He wanted to know why people were attracted to this teacher. Maybe this person named Jesus knew something that could fill the void in his life.

So when he heard that Jesus was nearby, he decided to find out if this teacher had some of the answers he was searching for. Perhaps he had also heard the rumors that Jesus spent time eating with sinners and tax collectors. It would be wonderful to eat with someone who would treat him like a human being.

But the crowd was too large, and he was too small to even see Jesus. You can also assume that he was not well-liked by those in the crowd who knew he was a chief tax collector. In their judgment, he was not a decent person, but a traitor and a crook. Thus Luke writes, "He wanted to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way."

If you are a little taller than average, you might have some difficulty understanding the problems of those who are shorter. When you sit in a chair of average size, your feet reach the floor. When you are in a crowd, it's not too difficult for you to see what you want to see. The problem of being taller than average also has its negative side. You're easier to spot when you don't want to be noticed. You have a problem sitting in the back seat of small automobiles, and you don't fit in the seats in the coach section of most airlines. Your knees keep bumping into the back of the seat in front of you.

However, what many people forget is that whether you are short in stature or tall, you can be short in other ways.

You might think of yourself as being short on musical talent. You have trouble carrying a tune when singing. You could be lacking the ability to be a good speaker in public or have little talent for acting in a drama production. You could consider yourself short in personality or sensitivity.

There are those who consider themselves short on intelligence. You could have trouble with computers or higher mathematics or in spelling difficult words. Still, others think of themselves as being short on looks. They do not see themselves as being beautiful or handsome. You could also be lacking in athletic talent. No matter how much you practice in a particular sport, there is little improvement.

I know people who are short on positive thoughts and long on negative ones. Some people are short on taking action. They have trouble getting started and then following through. You could

also be short on friends and have difficulty making friends. People talk about their "shortcomings."

There are those who are short on love. They have trouble loving others and in receiving love. In that aspect of life, I believe Zacchaeus was very short.

If you find yourself being short in any of these ways or in some other areas not mentioned, then this story about Zacchaeus is also a story about you.

Recognizing that you are short is one thing. Doing something about it is something else. People usually handle their problem of being short in one of three ways. Zacchaeus had three options. You have three options.

First, he could have stayed firmly on the ground and done nothing about his problem. That would have been the safest and easiest thing to do. Maybe if he had tried hard enough, he might have been able to get a peek through the crowd and see Jesus as he passed by. He could have said to himself, "Why make any special effort? I'm too short, and that's that. I'll continue to feel sorry for myself and do nothing. No one in the crowd likes me, so I'm sure Jesus would be no exception."

People who handle their problem of being short in this way usually find all sorts of excuses for taking no action. They have a disadvantage complex and tell themselves such things as, "I'm too old to make any changes." The truth is, you are never too old to make changes unless you give up. Only when you reach a point of not caring anymore, then and only then, are you too old.

Or you might say to yourself, "I'm handicapped by my being short, and it's no use trying to do anything about it." The most serious handicap anyone can have is to always give up — to do nothing.

A second way Zacchaeus could have handled his problem of being too short in stature would have been to get a box and stand on it so that he would have been as tall as the rest of the crowd. Then he would have at least been average and would not stand out in any way. He would be on the same level with others around him. 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 seen Jesus as he passed by in the same way as everyone else. He would have been one of the crowd. There's a certain security in being one of the crowd. You don't have to stick your neck out or go out on a limb. You can even hide in a crowd.

The third choice Zacchaeus had was to get ahead of the crowd and then to get above the ground and above the crowd. For him, that meant climbing a tree and literally going out on a limb. When you are out on a limb, you are taking a risk. You are visible, and you are vulnerable. In the case of Zacchaeus, it meant that it would be difficult for Jesus to miss him, and his enemies couldn't miss him either.

"When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said, 'Zacchaeus, hurry, come down; for I must stay at your house today.'"

Notice especially the response of Zacchaeus when Jesus invited himself to his house. By implication, he was also inviting himself into his life. “So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.” Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine that Jesus would invite himself to be a guest at his home and eat at his table.

I am convinced that Jesus sensed that Zacchaeus would not have had enough courage to extend the invitation. Zacchaeus knew he had shortcomings in more ways than being short physically. He did not think of himself as being worthy enough to have Jesus or anyone else as his guest. No one likes to be turned down.

When you climb a tree and go out on a limb as a way of dealing with your shortcomings, remarkable things can happen. When you make the first move, take the first step, when you are willing to take the necessary risk, you are, in effect, opening the door for the energy of God’s love to become active in your life. The first step is frequently the most difficult of all. That’s what members of AA tell me: “We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.” The old saying is true: the longest journey always begins with the first step. When Zacchaeus ran ahead of the crowd and climbed the tree, he was taking the first step. He was taking the second step when he accepted Jesus’ offer to be a guest in his home. That’s the first lesson in this story.

The second is this: no matter in what way you are “short” in your life, you need to know that God does not evaluate you in the same way that human beings evaluate each other.

For example, one of the most highly valued personal attributes in our culture and in many others is physical attractiveness. Accordingly, the personal worth of a newborn baby is frequently anxiously judged by his or her parents and others according to the child’s physical attractiveness. Although I’m sure you have learned, as I have, that how physically unattractive or attractive a baby might appear to be, has little to do with the person’s looks as a young person or adult.

However, this distorted system of assessing human worth in reference to physical attractiveness is widespread. Some years ago in Chicago, eight student nurses were viciously murdered. The following day a news 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 young women were so attractive.” He was implying that the individuals were more valuable human beings because of their beauty. If you accept that assumption, then the opposite is also true: the murders would have been less tragic if homely young women had been killed.

The Christian faith, however, underscores the fact that all human beings are created worthy and have the right to personal dignity and respect. That’s the way Jesus accepted people. He never evaluated them by their outward physical characteristics. Zacchaeus is only one example. Cultural values are not necessarily God’s values. Jesus said to Zacchaeus, a man who didn’t love himself very much and a person who was disliked by others, “Hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

Physical characteristics, intelligence, family background, social status, rich or poor, how tall or how short a person is: we have many ways of judging people and ourselves. But God sees you differently.

A father told me this story. He and his wife were going through adoption procedures for a baby. He said, “I realized that I was inspecting and evaluating this child as if I were buying a new

automobile. I was actually considering if this baby girl was qualified to become my daughter. Then I suddenly understood that the infant lying there before me was a magnificent creation, regardless of any physical characteristics. She was the creation of God who had given her an immortal soul. When I realized what I was doing, I was so ashamed of myself."

There's a wonderful story in the Old Testament about the prophet Samuel. He had the assignment from God to find a new king for Israel. He was about to select the tallest, the most handsome son of Jesse. According to the story, God told him he had chosen the wrong person. 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. God sees inside you. God does not judge as you and I judge. God looks past your shortcomings. God forgives you. When you accept God's invitation to come into your house, you are on the way to being changed for the better. Once Jesus was in the house of Zacchaeus and they ate together, he was on the way to becoming a changed man.

He was still small of stature physically, but that was no longer important. Now he knew he was forgiven and loved by God. Knowing that, he was able to love himself and to love others.

As I read this Bible story again this past week, I began to wonder if this story of Zacchaeus welcoming Jesus into his home for a meal and in so doing into his life is the basis for that simple table prayer most of you learned as children: "Come, Lord Jesus, be our guest, and let this food to us be blessed." Amen.