

The Rev. Emily Dunevant

November 9, 2019

Community Prayer Service

Luke 19:1-10

Do you remember climbing trees when you were little? I do. I remember climbing the dogwood tree in my grandmother's front yard. It was the biggest, broadest dogwood tree you have ever seen. About 2 feet up the trunk, it had a divide in it which created a nice little place to sit. As I got braver, I learned how to climb higher, but somehow, I could never get quite as high as my brother. He was an expert climber and seemed to have no fear of falling. If I tried to climb as high as he did, I inevitably would slip and skin my elbows or my knees. I wasn't the most graceful child. But I kept trying.

As I got older, I stopped climbing trees. Maybe I was afraid to fall. Maybe I was just too busy. It was after all, one of the pleasures relegated to childhood imagination and long afternoons playing outside, getting dirty, falling down, and getting back up again. It was joyful back then, falls and all. I didn't relate to the idea of defeat.

It made me realize, however, that we all become afraid to fall at some point in our lives. Afraid to mess up. Afraid to fail. Sometimes, we stop trying all together and find something easier, less risky to occupy our time.

So, when I read that tried and true story of Zaccheaus, the man we used to sing about in Sunday School (maybe you remember the song), I thought how incredible it was that he climbed that sycamore tree. He was an adult after all. And, my guess is that because he was an adult, he probably wasn't very adept at climbing anymore. Maybe he fell a few times trying to get high enough to see Jesus. Maybe folks laughed at him. Maybe the branches were thin and shaky and unstable.

And on the shaky, unstable branches, I imagine Zaccheaus holding on, determined. Falling a few times and getting back up to try again. Afraid to go higher but being pushed by this strange, nagging faith to step up on the next highest branch. I bet he was breathing hard, heart pounding, knees knocking as he stood up a little taller.

Jesus, look at me! Look how high I've climbed!

Now, Zaccheaus wasn't a great guy, at least that's what we are told. People didn't really like him. He had that kind of reputation. He had made mistakes, maybe lots of them. And most likely, when people saw him climbing that tree they thought...who does this guy think he is? Ugh!

One poem that I read described him like this...

Eventual saints by Steve Garnaas-Holmes

He's short, and everybody ridicules him.

He's resentful and bitter. No sense of humor.

Give thanks for him.

He never gets along with others. Bad listener.

Hard to talk to. Always has his own agenda.

Bless him.

He's a loner, can't seem to relate to people.

Off by himself, in his own little world.

Honor him.

He's selfish, obsessed with his own wants,
clever at cheating others, without remorse.

Lift him in prayer.

He's no saint, nobody you'd set as an example.

Without morals. Surely without grace.

Revere him.

Then someone comes along and sees
who's inside him, hidden, waiting—and says,

Zacchaeus, I'm having lunch with you.

You know...Zacchaeus could have gone home that day and never climbed that tree. He could have felt sorry for himself after hearing all of those things said about him, noticing everyone's disapproving stares. He could have thought he wasn't worthy to see Jesus...but he kept climbing. His determination and childlike wonder and dogged faith is worth remembering.

If the world tells you aren't worthy; if it tells you you should be defined by your mistakes; if it tells you you aren't good enough or pretty enough or smart enough it might be easy to stop climbing, to stop trying to see Jesus. But Jesus says none of that matters. None of it. In fact, when you are at your worst, when you have failed, when you fallen short of expectations, Jesus says he is thankful for you. Jesus blesses you and honors you. Jesus prays for you. That is worth the climb. So have courage and be willing to step on the next branch.

Amen.