

ZACCHAEUS

As we mention frequently, there are many ways to tell a story. To tell a story is to interpret life. It might be, for instance, that Zacchaeus was always a very devout man and that he deeply and humbly longed to see Jesus, whom he had heard about and admired from afar. If you tell the story that way, I will listen with avid interest to see how you understand the story coming together from that premise. I will tell the story from a different place today. What matters, as always, is whether or not we identify – whether or not we find ourselves in the story – so that we also can come to know Jesus. But we cannot tell a story very well except from the inside. So pardon me if I try, for a little while, to be Zacchaeus.

* * *

Funny how Mother Nature, and all her minor miracles, manages to play a part in every story we humans take part in. She doesn't seem to take sides, at least not when we're looking, but still, she is always there. I wonder, for instance, what my life would have been like if that tree had not been there for me to climb.

Ordinarily, you wouldn't think one tree could make a very big difference in a man's life one way or another. But as my mind rambles across past events, I am amazed at the part one tree played – not only in my life, but also in His.

I climbed my tree on purpose, with a conscious desire to show the crowds they couldn't stop me. It was an act of pure, stubborn pride. It ended up changing my life. He was *nailed* to His tree. Naturally, that was an awful thing that nobody could have wanted, and yet I know that for some terrible necessity, He got to His tree on purpose too. His was an act of pure love and an incredible kind of faith. It ended up changing many lives, even through generations still unborn.

But that is all at the end of my story, and I wanted to clear up some things because so many people know my story, or think they do. Only, it really didn't happen the way they think, if they think at all, which most of the time I doubt.

You can forgive my leftover traces of cynicism, if it pleases you. It is an old habit of mine and hard to break. In spite of all I've learned and had to unlearn, I still think many of my opinions are right. One of them is that most people are sheep who never think for themselves or act for themselves, but just wander about doing what they imagine others want them to do or expect them to do. Perhaps you will understand my attitude better if I just continue.

My name, a symbol of fate's warped sense of humor, is Zacchaeus, which means "pure" or "innocent" or even "righteous." Few names have been so ill-chosen. There are doctors named Paine and dentists named Toothacre. Well, I was a tax-collector named Pure.

People have made fun of my name, and of me, for as far back as I can remember. That doesn't mean you should start feeling sorry for me or anything like that. It just happens to be the way my life went. They made fun of me because I was short, and later they hated me because I was rich, but I never let people's opinions bother me much. In fact, I took pleasure in pitting my intelligence and determination against their attempts to close me out, and I usually did very well, I might add. I suppose it hurt a lot worse when I was a kid, but I learned. By the time I was eighteen, I was anything but "pure" or "innocent." I knew what kind of world I lived in, and about how much help and understanding I could expect from most of the people around me. Oh, they could talk a good game, with all their religious slogans and high-minded precepts about justice and brotherhood, but show one sign of weakness and they'd cut you to ribbons. Do you have a motto? I had a motto: "Sharks are drawn by the smell of blood." So nobody was going to feel my heartbeat or see my blood! I was truly kosher.

Anyway, I learned the rules, only I didn't try to cover it up with a lot of religious mumbo jumbo. The world had taught me how to play, and I decided to play harder and better than any of them. I became, as the story says, a chief tax-collector, and rich. Jericho was my town, the raciest and richest town in all Palestine. Half of the caravans between Egypt and anywhere came through Jericho. It was a fat chicken and I knew how to pluck. Rome didn't care much one way or the other, as long as she didn't see any ruckus and got her taxes. The Roman authorities sold the chief tax-collector position to the highest bidder. As long as you delivered the quota, they didn't care what else happened. It was no job for a man with a weak stomach or a soft heart, but I was not afflicted with either. The prize goes to the strong. Life had taught me well.

It was said that I could squeeze money out of a dying man's last breath. They were cursing me when they said it, but I was proud of it. There are many ways to make money out of a tax office; it isn't just the taxes themselves. I was on bid to Rome, and the other tax-collectors were on bid to me. Naturally, I set taxes to bring me a nice profit, and that was perfectly legal. But that was only my base of operations. Money-lending was my specialty. Some people called it extortion, but I thought of it more as an art. By means of my art, I became rich – very rich! My name became a symbol to the people of Jericho. If it was not a well-loved name, yet it was well known. What did I care for their stupid opinions? Let them hate me; I could afford it. I could live as I pleased and beg favors of no one. Yes, in Jericho, I – Zacchaeus the runt – was King of the Financiers. I had shown them all, and I intended to go on showing them.

That brings me to the tree-climbing episode. It really didn't happen the way some people make it sound. I wasn't out there climbing trees because I was so "desperately lonely" or anything of the kind. Such sentimental gush makes me sick.

It all happened quite naturally, if you consider the circumstances. Sure, I had heard of the man. Everybody had. But I figured He was just some nut, some crackpot. Either that, or as phony as the rest of the religious leaders I had met. It wasn't really my intention to get mixed up with Him at all. As a matter of fact, I was on my way to take care of a business affair when I ran into the crowd that was waiting for Him.

People are forever jumping to conclusions – it's the only exercise some people get. The crowd automatically assumed that just because they were stupid enough to be standing there in the heat waiting for this miracle-worker to come by, therefore I must have wanted to see Him too. Or that I wanted to ask Him for a favor, like everybody else did.

As I might have mentioned, I wasn't very popular with the people. Whatever I wanted, they didn't want me to have it. They especially didn't want any blessings or healings to come my way. They decided, as usual, to make things as difficult for me as possible. Immediately the crowd closed ranks to shut me out and then started their stupid name-calling. They didn't want me to see their great religious prophet – my glance might corrupt His holiness and so forth. Truth to tell, I didn't want to see Him. But the fact that *they* didn't want me to see Him and were going to make sure I didn't get a chance to, well, suddenly it made me want to see Him very much.

What I could not achieve by my slight stature, I had always been able to manage by using my wits. They were having so much fun keeping me out, that I couldn't resist the temptation to show them. I scrambled up that tree and out along a nice large limb, and there I sat calmly above them, with a much better view than any of them had.

Apparently He heard my name from the crowd's abusive remarks. Some of them were jeering and pointing toward me. Others, I gathered, had scurried up the road to inform Him of my presence and give Him a brief summary of what an evil and wretched person I was.

I began to regret my impetuous action. Now I was trapped and couldn't make a graceful exit without seeming to run away. Here was His big chance to make a hit with the crowd. I would have to sit and publicly listen to a religious scolding. Lots of priests had mentioned my character as illustration for their sermons. It made the people happy and gave the priests a good reputation for being bold enough and daring enough to confront me with my sins. Usually I just walked away and paid no attention. But this time I was caught.

My only hope was to keep a slight smile on my face and pretend to be amused by it all. As He came toward me, I braced myself and prepared to go into my act. The crowd quieted down in anticipation, almost holding its breath. They were sure I was really going to get what was coming to me.

Well, oh well, you should have been there! He surprised them all the way to Sheol and back again. They had been so sure He would give me the angry-prophet treatment, maybe with a curse or a slight miracle thrown in. But He greeted me like a long-lost brother. They couldn't believe their ears. To tell you the truth, it shocked the daylights out of me too. For a minute, I thought I was going to fall right out of that tree!

"Zacchaeus," He called up, just as warm and friendly as could be, loud and clear, so everybody could hear. "Zacchaeus, come down from there. It's been a long, hot journey, I'm half starved, and I was hoping you could put me up for the night." In my country, you know, the law of hospitality is both a sacred duty and a high honor. You don't just eat with anybody. You eat with relatives and trusted friends.

Oh wow, I thought to myself: This guy is *not* from around here. This would be the last time any self-respecting citizen of Jericho would listen to Him or associate with Him ever again. He had just blown whatever

ministry He might have planned for Jericho. I figured that friendly greeting had just cost Him the backing of about five hundred people, meaning everyone within earshot. By nightfall it would be fifteen thousand.

For a fleeting second, I felt sorry for Him, but I wasn't about to miss a chance like that. All the pious hypocrites had turned out to welcome Him and do Him honor, and they would have loved to take Him home. But He was going off with me, Zacchaeus, the scum of Jericho. It was gorgeous! I'll remember the faces on that crowd 'til the day I die.

That was a long time ago, now. But the events of that day are still as fresh in my mind as the day they happened. I've gone over and over it, and it means things to me that I can't really put into words. Nobody else would understand it much anyway. Besides, I hate a public show of emotion.

I'll tell you this much, though: He wasn't like the others. I was still a little worried when we got to my house – which wasn't the shabbiest one in Jericho, by the way. I was afraid that with the crowds gone and the situation more, you know, intimate – well, you know these *religious* people. I thought He might decide to go to work on me after all. But as I said, He was different.

Some people act very uncomfortable in rich surroundings. He seemed just as relaxed as if He had lived there all His life. With most people who came into my house, I felt this unspoken thing of judgment or jealousy – either, “What right have you got to all of this?” or, “Why don't you give me some?”

With Him, it didn't seem to matter one way or the other. I suppose He was thinking and sizing me up more than it showed, but He just seemed so *natural* – except that very few people seem to be natural, so I guess that makes it really unnatural. As I said, I never could put some things into words very well.

After a while I started to feel comfortable myself, more comfortable than I can ever remember feeling with another person. It was like His naturalness was rubbing off on me. When we finally did get around to talking seriously, it was like we had known each other for years. He wasn't trying to shove anything down my throat, and I wasn't trying to protect myself or pretend I didn't care about things. We were just talking about life, what we thought about it, what was important to us, things like that.

There was this one big question in the back of my mind, though. I kept wondering if He really understood who I was. Maybe He was just so naive that He didn't comprehend what had been happening. Nobody had ever treated me like a real person before, and I couldn't quite believe that this man understood what the crowds had tried to tell Him. I know it sounds silly, but I had to find out.

That was surprise number two! He knew my business almost as well as I knew it myself. It seemed He had this friend, a guy named Matthew, whom He was really close to. He was under no illusions about tax-collectors. He knew what my life was like, alright.

"From your point of view," I said finally, "I must represent just about everything you consider wrong in this world." We talked a long time about that. It wasn't His opinion at all. Strangely enough, He seemed to see a lot of good in me, only He called it *misplaced* – I was so mad at the world, and everybody in it, that everything I did was controlled by my anger and resentment. In the mood I was in and the way He said it, well, it just seemed so obvious that I wondered why I hadn't realized it all along.

And, meaning no disrespect, but I began to feel like we had a lot in common. In one sense, He didn't like the world any better than I did. And in His own way, He was just as much a misfit and just as contemptuous of public opinion. From a few of His remarks, I gathered we even held the same opinion about some of the religious leaders.

The big difference was that I felt sorry for myself because of the way the world was, and He felt sorry for the world because it was in so much pain. That's why I got angry, and why He got compassionate. The whole world was wrong, but somehow He had gotten right and He knew it. The whole world was wrong and I knew it, but I just kept on getting wronger. That was the difference.

Sometimes I wish I had gone with Him, like His friend Matthew. He knew, though of course I didn't, that He was on His way to Jerusalem ... where they killed Him.

What for? Go figure. For being friends with people like me, I guess. I don't like to think about it very much. It starts to bring back my anger – the white-hot, blind rage. Only, I promised Him I wouldn't let that rule my life anymore. Yet I wonder all the more that a man facing death had time to stop and care enough to call me out of that tree, deliver me

from the crowd, and spend time talking with me into the night ... like He didn't have a care in the world.

I have tried since that day to find ways to say "Thank you" to Him. I'm sure that sounds weird. But I never knew who I was, or what I wanted to be like, until He came along. I never really liked life, or anything in it, until He came along. Everything has simply seemed different to me since that day.

Oh, it's hard to remember at times – hard not to go back to my old ways. And what I do is a small thing and probably doesn't really matter. But I keep hoping it will please Him. I'm still the chief tax-collector in Jericho. Most of the people still hate me. But I don't hate *them* anymore. I keep the books as carefully as ever, only now I make sure that if anybody gets cheated, it's me. I still lend money too, even to people I'm not sure can ever pay me back. And I make sure they pay me back, but only when they can afford it. Sometimes I even help to arrange that.

And I have a few friends now. Never thought I would see that day. They kid me about being soft-hearted under my crusty exterior. But they like my home and find many excuses to come visit. Secretly, that pleases me very much.

Lots of things still bother me, you understand. In different ways, they bother me more than ever before, and something inside hurts worse than it ever did before. But that's okay now. I wish I could do more, but Jericho is a hard town and I'm only one man, and some things in this world don't change very much. But I really try now to do what I can. How else can a person say THANK YOU to Him?

Sometimes I sit at night and watch the stars, thinking about Mother Nature and how she does her work, stays neutral, and doesn't care. But even if nature doesn't care, something else does. SomeONE else does. I know that now. Just like I know that there are two kinds of trees in this world: My kind, that you try to climb up to get above other people. And His kind, the kind you get nailed to, if you truly love people.

Those are the only two kinds of trees they make in this world. And down deep inside, where my heartbeat starts, I know now that I like His kind better than mine.

ZACCHAEUS

PRAYER

We feel in Zacchaeus the story of a man who found peace with Thee, Great Spirit – and more to his surprise than to his deserving. We are comforted and not surprised that Jesus was willing to come stay with Zacchaeus. So let us dare to believe that You are willing to come stay with us too. Help us to find whatever it is we need to climb, that we may see You – and that You may call us past our anger and fear, back to Your love. This we pray in the name of Jesus the Christ.