

First Presbyterian Church
“Close Encounters of the Jesus Kind: Tax Collector”
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Genesis: 24:10-28; Luke 19:1-10

There are some stories in the Bible we wisely save to teach our kids when they get older, but when we come across a kid-friendly story we tend to go overboard. Zacchaeus is one of those stories. There are cartoons about Zacchaeus, songs and coloring books. His story is in every children's bible I have ever seen, and I have even walked past a plush toy Zacchaeus at a baby store. One problem with that is we can start to think this IS a kid's story and there is nothing in the story for adults.

However, with the adult experience, we can see some underlying problems that escape us as children. For one, when was the last time you climbed a tree? Climbing trees for kids could happen on any random Tuesday. As adults, we realize how badly Zacchaeus must have wanted to get a glimpse of Jesus. Badly enough to stretch his tendons beyond any recent ability, endure the bone cracks and muscle aches to pull himself up onto a branch, and test his aging sense of balance to position himself just right to see the top of Jesus' head as he walked by.

A glimpse of Jesus was all Zacchaeus expected when he chose to climb that tree. It was worth all that effort and risk to just see the top of Jesus' head. Zacchaeus would have been thrilled with that outcome. He could have told that story for the rest of his life about the day he saw Jesus' hair. Then comes the part that as an adult, I am even more stunned by Zacchaeus. Jesus stops at the foot of the tree, looks up at Zacchaeus, and... invites himself over for dinner.

Now when I put myself into Zacchaeus's place the first fear that flashes across my mind is, “I'm not ready.” I don't know about your house, but mine needs at least 24 hours of notice before company comes. I need to clean. I need to make sure I have all fresh ingredients for my most impressive recipes. I make sure I have wine fit for the caliber of guests in attendance. There is a lot to be done to host someone for dinner. My second fear would be, **HOW AM I GOING TO GET DOWN OUT OF THIS TREE?!**

None of those fears seems to phase Zacchaeus. He doesn't even flinch when the people around him start to mutter about how he is not worthy to welcome Jesus. Somehow Zacchaeus can listen to Jesus' voice louder than the fears begging for attention. He ignores all the excuses to refuse Jesus and is ready to say “yes” despite the fear.

As an adult, the story of Zacchaeus shines a light on two things I think are key to learning from his encounter with Jesus. 1) set achievable expectations and 2) be ready to say yes when the big opportunity comes. Zacchaeus set an achievable goal when Jesus came into town. He wanted to get a glimpse of him. It wasn't an easy goal. He had to fight the crowds of people who did not care for his presence and then climb a tree to even have a chance to see Jesus. There was a possibility Zacchaeus would fail to see Jesus and would have to go home a failure, but he went out ready to do what needed to be done to reach his goal.

That tenacity to try may also be the reason Zacchaeus was ready to say “yes” when Jesus invited himself over. Zacchaeus probably wasn't ready in the ways I would like to be for company coming over. He wasn't cleaning or stocking his pantry thinking he would have such a guest of honor visit. Zacchaeus's “readiness” was that he wasn't going to let fear steal this blessing away from him. He did not let fear convince him that he was not ready.

Expectations and ignoring fear come up a lot on one of my favorite TV shows. Do I have any fellow Shark Tank watchers out there? I love Shark Tank. If you don't watch Shark Tank, the show has five billionaires who hear pitches from new businesses and products that they might want to invest in. The entrepreneurs do their best to win a Shark's investment and mentorship.

If you watch Shark Tank you know that sitting in the center chair is always Mr. Wonderful. He invests in all kinds of products and companies and he is the shark among sharks. With all these different investments, he often researches why some of his companies are doing better than others. He analyzes their strategies and meets with the founders to see if he can learn something from the top performers and

teach that to the underperforming businesses. In 2016, Mr. Wonderful noticed something as he was meeting his top-performing companies. When meeting with the founders and CEOs of those top companies there was at least one woman in the room. Mr. Wonderful then asked his researchers to do a specific analysis of female-led companies versus male led companies.

They found that their investments in companies with at least one female founder performed 63% better than their investments in all-male teams. Well of course Mr. Wonderful wanted to know why. They dug deeper and found it all came down to how they set goals for their company. The companies that performed the best set achievable goals.

The underperforming companies were setting goals that shot for the farthest star hoping it would motivate their teams to hustle harder and win bigger. What they found was it was leading to low morale and high employee turnover. The companies that set sky-high goals would do great in the first quarter, but then they would coast in the second and third quarter thinking they were almost to the goal and could pull back. When the end of the year loomed, they burnt themselves out trying to get across the finish line in the last days, often failing to meet their goal.

The companies that set achievable goals weren't just reaching their goals, they were setting higher ones, sometimes even in the first quarter. They were ending their year beyond the goals other companies set on day one because they had gotten there step-by-step. The employees celebrated multiple wins along the way. They were building morale, attracting better talent, retaining valuable leaders within the company, and feeling fulfilled by their work.

Now Mr. Wonderful coaches all his businesses to set achievable goals. That doesn't mean easy goals, you may have to climb a few trees to get there, but when you get there the "win" can power you through the next goal. Achievable goals are the first thing we can learn from Zacchaeus.

The next thing is to not let fear fool you into saying "no" to great opportunities. Last week on Shark Tank there was an entrepreneur who was pitching a new kind of deodorant. She talked about the harmful chemicals in most deodorants on the market and her journey to try natural options that didn't deodorize anything. Then she talked about her formula and how well her company was doing. I thought for sure she would get an offer because she had all the numbers ready to go. But one by one the Sharks said they were out, they were not going to invest.

With one Shark still interested, she mentioned to them how an hour before this moment she was hiking around the Griffiths Observatory. While deep into her hike, she got a call from Shark Tank producers asking her if she could come to make a pitch RIGHT NOW. The athletic clothing she was wearing was not a choice to market her deodorant; it was what she put on when she left her house thinking she was going for a hike in the mountains.

This revelation changed how the other sharks saw her. Two sharks started talking in hushed tones on the side to each other and quickly came back in to make her an offer better than what was being offered to her. Their reason for suddenly deciding to invest after initially turning her down was her willingness to say "yes" to an opportunity despite it not coming at the perfect moment. She did not let her fear of being unprepared, not having the right clothes on, the right display boards, the right makeup, the right whatever scare her away from taking this chance. And the reality, in the end, was her recent hike convinced the sharks even more that the deodorant worked.

Fear is very good at pointing out all the ways we can fail. Fear will convince us that we are not ready or worthy of the blessings and opportunities God sends us. But Zacchaeus shows us that if we are willing to put the effort into achievable goals, God will meet us with amazing opportunities.

This is not to say burn your vision boards, but make them adaptable. Draw out the steps that will need to happen along the way to the grand vision. The wins along the way will catapult you on to the next win. And when something great comes along, don't let any fear have a say about what you are ready for or what you deserve. With God, those who are willing to climb to the top of the tree for just a glimpse of God's glory will find themselves being offered opportunities they could not even imagine when they were standing on the ground. God honors those who are content with a glimpse with even more.

Set achievable goals and say "yes" in the face of fear. May we all allow Zacchaeus to inspire us this week, and in the weeks to come.