



# *Lakeside Sermons*

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
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REFORMATION SUNDAY

To Be or Not To Be (Seen)  
Luke 19:1-10; II Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

I don't know if you heard about it or not, but there was a rally of sorts that garnered quite a bit of attention. The crowd was excited because a high profile celebrity was coming to town. The main road into town was lined with people, likely two or three deep in places. Men and women were standing shoulder to shoulder with children tucked between their knees or hoisted on their shoulders. The excitement was electric and everyone was talking and straining their necks to see when the entourage appeared. Law enforcement officials were close by, clustered in groups of four or five in case something happened and the crowd got out of hand. Some people were eager to see him because he talked about values they supported and promised to change the way things operated once and for all. Other people were a bit nervous because they did not always agree with the vision this man had and wondered how it would change their day to day lives.

As the moments ticked by, the crowd became restless. Latecomers were having trouble finding a spot where they could see. In fact, one person had to get rather creative in order to end up with the best seat of all. Let me read you one account of what happened:

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying 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. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Luke 19:1-10

Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton may have the benefit of twenty-four hour press coverage and the power of social media, but Jesus could draw a crowd as well--often larger than the ones today's candidates manage to coax into stadiums and parking lots. And just like some of our present-day rallies, when Jesus drew a crowd, there were sometimes hecklers and tension grew high.

I suspect that, just like the nightly news which often loses our attention because we hear the same stories over and over with different names and locations, this familiar story of Zacchaeus climbing a tree to get a look at Jesus has grown a little stale over the years. Right now, about the only interesting thing you can come up with about the story is that catchy little tune we all learned as a child: "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a Sycamore tree, the Lord for him to see." If nothing else, you will think about Zacchaeus the rest of the day because that tune will be playing in your head!

Actually, there is very good reason to think about Zacchaeus. Luke tells this story in a series of events that happen as Jesus makes his way to Jerusalem where, we know, he will be arrested, crucified, and killed. (But that won't be the end of the story!

As with some of the other stories Luke tells, seeing is an important aspect of what happens. We are told that Zacchaeus could not get through the crowd to see Jesus and decided to climb a tree for a better view. Let's look at Zacchaeus for a moment.

We know that Zacchaeus was a tax collector which was not a popular occupation in Israel. Although he was a Jew, he went to work for the Roman government to gather the taxes that Caesar levied on his subjects to support his building programs, wars, and lavish lifestyle. An IRS agent today would be considered popular next to a tax collector in first century Israel. Tax collectors were seen as traitors because they colluded with the Romans. They were also considered cheats and thieves because they could tack on to your taxes whatever amount they wanted in order to fatten their wallet a bit more. Zacchaeus was a chief tax collector which meant that he benefitted from other men who worked under his supervision. He was extremely wealthy, "filthy rich," to use a current-day descriptive. No wonder he was thrown into that collective group of sinners we often read about which included thieves, rogues, prostitutes, and tax collectors.

The text also tells us that Zacchaeus was short in stature, thus the song describes him as a "wee little man." But look a bit closer. Perhaps Zacchaeus was rather short, but the word which is used to describe Zacchaeus does not usually refer to height. My friend Sam Codington researched this term and learned that, more often than not, it is used to refer to someone who was "short" in age or experience. Jesus spoke of welcoming a child, the least of these, into the kingdom of God and of our responsibility to provide food, drink, clothing, and compassion to the "least of these." In ministering to them, we minister to Christ.

Zacchaeus may have been short or he may have been young, even childlike. Keep in mind that he did skinny up a tree in order to get a better look at Jesus. Such behavior would have been unbecoming a man of his position in the community, even if people did not like him. The people around him would have interpreted it as either comical or humiliating. Certainly, because he was included in that broad class of "sinners," Zacchaeus would have been thought of as one of the "least of these." Whatever reason compelled him to climb the tree, being short or impetuous or desperate, Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. Obviously, like everyone else in the crowd, he had heard about this man who taught with unparalleled authority and performed miracles as if he were sent by God. Some people were even saying that he was the Messiah. Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus for himself.

Apparently, Jesus wanted to see Zacchaeus as well. As he and his fellow travelers entered the city and the crowd pressed in around him, Jesus looked up, saw this man perched in a tree, and called him by name. Had Zacchaeus' reputation preceded him? Had Jesus heard of this short tax collector before? Did he know that there was a very young chief tax collector in Jericho that sometimes did odd things like climb a tree? Had he heard something else about this unusual man that made him unforgettable? We don't know. What we do know is that Jesus stopped beneath the tree, called up to Zacchaeus, and told him to come down because he was going to spend the day at his house.

Zacchaeus hurried down the tree. Or maybe he swung down from a branch or jumped right out of the fork in which he was sitting. When he landed, he was grinning from ear to ear, so happy was he to welcome Jesus to his home. But the people in the crowd, perhaps the same ones who had shifted from side to side and tightened up their positions when Zacchaeus was trying to find a place to wait for Jesus, began to murmur against him. They grumbled, as people often did when Jesus was around. "He's going to

the home of that sinner?!" "Jesus better keep his hand on his wallet or Zacchaeus will have his money, too." "Who in the world would want to walk into that man's house?" They probably said a lot worse, and no doubt Zacchaeus had heard much worse. They looked on Zacchaeus with contempt. and freely expressed it with their lips.

Maybe he was tired of hearing such derogatory comments which cut deep or perhaps he did not want Jesus to change his mind. Zacchaeus spoke up: "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I pay back four times as much." Various translations treat this statement in different ways. Some of them translate it as a statement of repentance and a desire to do better in the future: "I will give half my possessions to the poor. I will pay back four times as much." But in the text, the verb is present tense suggesting that, perhaps, Zacchaeus is already quite generous to the poor and generously repentant when he does harm to someone else. "Look," Zacchaeus says, "Look at me! I am not the swindler and low-life cheat everyone thinks I am. Look at me. This is who I am!" Jesus does look at him. And then, I suspect, he looks at the now silent crowd and says, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham." He urged the people to look at Zacchaeus and to remember that he was one of them, a Hebrew, a son of Abraham, a child of God!

Today is Reformation Sunday, a time when we look back at a significant time of stress and change in the Christian Church and an opportunity for us to look at ourselves to see ways in which we need to change and grow. Keep in mind that when Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-Five Theses to the door of the Wittenberg church, the last thing on his mind was a major schism which would rip the Roman Catholic Church apart and result in a splintering of Christian groups such as had never been imagined. Martin Luther wanted concerned Christian people to take a look at themselves and their religion. He wanted them to look at their understanding of scripture and the ways in which they interpreted scripture into practice. He feared the ever-growing authority of the papacy. He feared the abuse of that authority when it was used to raise money as in the case of indulgences. He feared the lack of authority given to holy scripture. He feared the weakening of salvation to a series of hoops through which one must jump. He feared the way in which God's grace was practically ignored as the source of salvation. He invited his fellow Christians to take a look at their faith--and unwittingly began a reformation.

It is always a good day for reformation in the church. It is always good to take a close look at ourselves, to ask some probing questions, to rethink our ministries, and to check the pulse on our calling. Who are we to this community? How do other people see Lakeside? We think of ourselves as traditional, vibrant, progressive, and involved. Is that how we are perceived in the community? What does this church mean to the community or, to put it differently, if Lakeside were not here, what difference would it make? That is not an easy scenario to imagine, much like imagining our own death and what life would be like if we were not here. If we did not occupy this corner on Sunset and Piedmont, would it matter? Would it make any difference?

If the answer is yes, then what does that mean for me and for you? If the presence of this church really matters to each of us and to the community of God, what difference should that make in our lives? Should this sanctuary be filled on Sunday mornings? If so, where are the people who should be in these seats? Why do some of our members not come as often as they once did? Are we ministering to their needs? Does the church no longer matter to them? Do we take our church and one another for granted, assuming someone will take our place in worship or Sunday School or on a committee or in leadership or in ministry? If this congregation means so much to so many people, why is it such an effort to fund our ministries? We dare not fail to pay the mortgage lest we lose our home. We would not fail to pay for our utilities lest we lose power and heat or air conditioning. We would not fail to pay the note on our cars or the tuition for our children or the fees for membership in our various clubs. We would not even fail to pay the cable bill lest all but a few channels on our TVs go silent. Surely our calling to be this family of faith is at least that important. Certainly it is far more important.

As a congregation, we need to climb up our respective trees so that we can have a better look at Jesus and what he calls us to do. At the urging of Luther and other Reformers like him, we need to give scripture a prominent place in our faith and look honestly and bravely at the story of God and his people. Then we need to come down from those lofty perches and take a good look at ourselves and our church.

Luke tells parable after parable with the themes of looking and seeing at the core. Someone is blind and regains their sight. A leper is healed and sees that Jesus is the source of his mercy. Two people go to the temple to pray and neither can see God's mercy but God sees their hearts. A man climbs a tree to see Jesus and Jesus sees him. He helps the people in the

crowd to see him as well. Looking and seeing are important. It is the first step in reformation. It is the first step in living the life Christ calls us to live.

I have come to appreciate the insight of David Brooks, an opinion writer for the *New York Times*. Recently he wrote an essay titled "The Power of a Dinner Table." I regret that it has not appeared in our local paper. Maybe it will. I was introduced to this essay by someone who commented on the story of Zacchaeus and helped me to see how important it is to look.<sup>1</sup>

Brooks writes about a couple named Kathy Fletcher and David Simpson and their son Santi. They live in Washington, D.C. Listen to his experience with this couple:

Santi had a friend who sometimes went to school hungry. So Santi invited him to occasionally eat and sleep at his house.

That friend had a friend and that friend had a friend, and now when you go to dinner at Kathy and David's house on Thursday night there might be 15 to 20 teenagers crammed around the table, and later there will be groups of them crashing in the basement or in the few small bedrooms upstairs.

The kids who show up at Kathy and David's have endured the ordeals of modern poverty: homelessness, hunger, abuse, sexual assault. Almost all have seen death firsthand — to a sibling, friend or parent.

It's anomalous for them to have a bed at home. One 21-year-old woman came to dinner last week and said this was the first time she'd been around a family table since she was 11.

And yet by some miracle, hostile soil has produced charismatic flowers. Thursday dinner is the big social occasion of the week. Kids come from around the city. Spicy chicken and black rice are served. Cell phones are banned ("Be in the now," Kathy says).

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<sup>1</sup>Karoline Lewis, "Salvation Today," *Working Preacher* (October 23, 2016); available online at: <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?m=4377&post=4745>.

The kids call Kathy and David “Momma” and “Dad,” are unfailingly polite, clear the dishes, turn toward one another’s love like plants toward the sun and burst with big glowing personalities. Birthdays and graduations are celebrated. Songs are performed.

I started going to dinner there about two years ago, hungry for something beyond food. Each meal we go around the table, and everybody has to say something nobody else knows about them.

Each meal we demonstrate our commitment to care for one another. I took my daughter once and on the way out she said, “That’s the warmest place I can ever imagine.”

During this election season of viciousness, vulgarity and depravity, Thursdays at Kathy and David’s has been a weekly uplift, and their home a place to be reminded of what is beautiful about our country and what we can do to bring out its loveliness.

The kids need what all adolescents need: bikes, laptops and a listening heart. “Thank you for seeing the light in me,” one young woman told Kathy after a cry on the couch.<sup>2</sup>

“Thank you for seeing me.” What a powerful confession! Most of the people who sit at the table in this home on Thursday evenings are people we would consider to be the “least of these.” They are young, yes, but they are also woefully short on money, family, self-confidence, opportunities, and respect from other people. This family has created a community of God around their dinner table. They look at one another and see each other for who they are--children of God. Salvation has indeed come to that house!

We need to look. We need to see. We need to find ways to refresh and re-establish the community of God in this house and in all of the places we travel. God has created and called us to be something special. Let us look to see what that will be. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup>David Brooks, “The Power of a Dinner Table,” *The New York Times*, October 18, 2016; available online at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/18/opinion/the-power-of-a-dinner-table.html>.

October 30, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Our opinion of ourselves is often so dim, O God, that we cannot imagine the pure delight that you take in us. Yet, like a loving and proud father, you see us and your happiness erupts into a dance of love. We are humbled, O God, by the intensity of your joy and the depth of your love.

We thank you for the lineage of faith which stretches across place and time to unite us with all believers. We are grateful for your patience and for the many ways you guide us in faith. Continue to lead us into the community of your love, O God. Chasten us when necessary, correct us when we stray, and teach us how to live our faith day by day.

Ours is a magnificent and complex world, and we pray that you will continue to help us as we seek to be good caretakers of this gift. Inspire us to be good stewards of the earth and all of its assets. Enlighten us to become good neighbors to all who share this space with us. Help us to discover peace, we pray, and to permeate the world with goodwill and harmony.

We have shared the needs of our friends, O God, and you know all too well the needs that we have. Grant us the resources we need for healthy living. Give us vitality to enjoy the life we are given. And instill in us the generosity to share your goodness with all people. Bless us, we pray, with keen awareness of your presence and fill us with the energy of your Spirit; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.