Sequoyah Hills Presbyterian Church
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Thirst: Planting Sycamores
Luke 19:1-10

We started this series “Thirst” two weeks ago looking at the 42nd Psalm, which begins, “As the deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God,” and during this time we’re asking why is it that we, and when I say “we” I mean everyone, what is it about us that has this innate longing, this thirst for God, so much so that something feels amiss when we don’t have it or when we try to satisfy it with cheap knock offs. Kind of along the same lines, each week we’ve been closing our sermons with a prayer adapted from a work called The Confessions by Augustine, which reads, “You have made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.” Last week, we were in the fourth chapter of the Gospel of John and Jesus’ encounter with a Samaritan woman at a well, kind of keeping with the whole thirst and water thing, and we’re actually going to come back to that story next week. But this week, we look at a story that, kind of breaking the trend, has nothing to do with water but everything to do with thirst. We look at Jesus’ exchange with a man who it seems everyone had given up on, and a lesson too for what the church should and shouldn’t be. Will you pray with me?

*Holy God, for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.*

Whenever you deal with a biblical tax collector, like Zacchaeus, and a handful of others show up within the four Gospels, pretty universally they get a bad reputation in this ancient Jewish world. So much so, they get singled out even when Jesus or someone else is talking broadly about sin or sinners, saying stuff like “sinners and tax collectors,” as if the word “sinners” wouldn’t already cover it. It’s not just the usual contempt folks have with having to pay taxes in the first place. Folks don’t particularly like the Internal Revenue Service, but if someone works for the IRS I dare say folks don’t just categorically write them off. Different thing for these ancient tax collectors. Wasn’t quite like the IRS, and here’s why.

These tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, were thought of as traitorous and corrupt. They were often Jewish, local people, but they worked for the Romans, collecting taxes from their neighbors to support this foreign empire, and because they had all the leverage in how much tax was owed, they had the reputation of padding their own pockets, getting rich off of exploiting those who had no recourse. So, as a result, even though these tax collectors had the protection of the Roman Empire and the luxury of wealth, they were social pariahs and were shunned by their local communities. No doubt it was a lonely life, and if a tax collector had any conscience at all, a life that would gnaw at one’s spirit.

That, it seems, is where Zacchaeus is. I might be reading too much between the lines here, but when the text tells us in v. 2 that he was a chief tax collector—not just a tax collector, mind you, a chief tax collector—and was rich, I see a man who has become shackled to his own wealth, embittered by the choices he had made in his profession to defraud people who had been his neighbors and friends, a man who had come to discover that he didn’t much care for the man he had become.
And the reason I think all that was the case was because this man who had more than likely been shunned and cast out, looked upon in the streets with hatred and contempt, went out into these hostile streets one day among all these people who knew him and hated him, all because he had heard that this man Jesus was passing through, and the text says “He was trying to see who Jesus was.”

Back when we were in Memphis, a few years back there was a wedding in town, and oddly enough the groom was good friends with the British royalty Princes William and Harry, and they actually came to Memphis for the wedding. For a day or two the city was a zoo, because word had gotten out that Prince William and Prince Harry were in town. Folks tried to track their motorcade, noting their whereabouts on social media, sightings on Instagram and Twitter. The wedding organizers had to add special security to guard against paparazzi and other safety concerns. They had to arrange to block guests’ cell phones so that folks wouldn’t post needlessly from the wedding just to get a shot of the princes; they had to put up visibility shields around the property hosting the wedding to keep the paparazzi from climbing trees to snap pictures, all because the British royalty were in town. Feels almost like it’s that kind of scene here in Jericho. Tons of people, crowding the streets, all because this man Jesus was passing through.

But the reason folks went out in the streets and even into the trees to catch a glimpse of the princes was not the same reason Zacchaeus climbed his tree. For the princes in Memphis, that was just tourism, just was trying to catch sight of a celebrity. No doubt there was obsession there, but it was tourism. And when Jesus passed through Jericho, there might have been some tourism going on for all the folks who packed the streets that day, but that’s not why Zacchaeus went out there. Something else was drawing him out.

The text says, “He was trying to see who Jesus was,” not “He was trying to see Jesus,” “He was trying to see who Jesus was.” It’s like Zacchaeus went out into the crowded streets because he had heard there was something about this Jesus, and he wanted to know if it was true. He wanted to know who he was, who he really was, not just see him, not just set eyes on him; he wanted to know who he was.

So he risks going out in the streets, but he can’t see Jesus at all. The streets are packed, and he’s a shorter guy. But he doesn’t give up, whether out of determination or desperation, he runs ahead through the crowded streets, and I imagine, because he’s running past all these people who despise him, that he’s getting bumped and shoved by anyone with a chance to get a shot in, but he runs ahead, and finds a sycamore tree. He climbs it so he can see better, and it appears he is successful, but then he gets much, much more than he bargained for.

Some of you may have heard this story before, some of you might not have, but Jesus comes that way, looks up into the tree, sees this man Zacchaeus and calls out to him by name, inviting himself over to Zacchaeus’ house. The people are disgusted that Jesus would ever associate with this traitor and thief, but Jesus doesn’t flinch. Then Zacchaeus, almost like The Grinch or Ebenezer Scrooge from A Christmas Carol, is suddenly struck with generosity, giving extravagantly to the poor and seeking to make amends for his past exploitation, culminating in Jesus proclaiming that salvation had come to that house, for the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.

It’s powerful, this about-face for Zacchaeus. This is a man who, I think the text hints at enough for us to say without too much stretching, was miserable with himself, who couldn’t escape that something was missing. He had all he could want materially, but something was wrong. And so, he seeks Jesus out, but he can’t see him. So he climbs a tree to see who Jesus is,
and not only does he see Jesus, he finds out just who Jesus is. Jesus is the sort of person that
would call to him, to him, this man who everyone else hates, and say he was coming to share in
fellowship with him. Something changes in Zacchaeus. His longing had been answered. His
thirst had been satisfied, and all of sudden, everything that had defined him for so long, his quest
for wealth, his profession, didn’t matter so much to him anymore.

But not everyone accepts this change, or even the possibility for it. They’re more
concerned with whether it was appropriate for Jesus to even be associating with a man this
despised.

Not that this person is the same as Zacchaeus, but the hip hop artist Kanye West, though I
wouldn’t go so far as saying he’s universally despised like an ancient tax collector, I would say
that Kanye West isn’t someone that very many people have just a neutral opinion about. And the
reasons for that aren’t that unreasonable. He’s a big personality. He’s very confident and has
been outspoken about his opinion of his own talent. He’s outspoken with what many might
consider outlandish stances.

But two days ago, not without some surprise, Kanye West released a new album titled
“Jesus Is King,” speaking of his own conversion to the Christian faith, and the tracks on the
album are all about what Jesus had done in his life. And as if almost on cue, the blogosphere and
social media posts starting trickling in. There were some who shared encouragement at the
public declaration of faith and change, but then there were a whole, whole lot of people who
couldn’t or just didn’t want to accept it, given his past.

And I bring that up because, whether it’s with Zacchaeus or with Kanye West, there’s
something heartbreaking about the role others can play in discouraging or damaging one’s search
for the Lord. Too often, that role is taken by the church, and it is the church acting like the
townspeople in the street, looking at Jesus with grumbling eyes that one so despised
would ever be included.

But there’s another image in this story, one that I couldn’t shake loose of, another image
for what the church could be as a part of this man’s search and thirst for God. When I read this
passage, and it might sound like a random detail, but I want to know who planted the tree. Who
was it that years before planted the seed that would later grow into the tree that Zacchaeus
climbed into order to see who Jesus was? I’m sure they had no idea the seed they planted would
one day be the platform from which a desperate man sought to know the Lord, but what an
image for the church, to be this place where the desperate can seek to see the Lord. I want to
know who planted the tree.

What would happen if we thought of a church’s ministry like that? Planting sycamores
now and tending to sycamores that were planted long ago, with the hopes that some might climb
them to see the Lord. So often in churches, the ministries and structures we put together, even
though they’re started in faithfulness, can become ends unto themselves, meant to prop itself up,
whether it’s a particular program or a building or even a Stewardship Campaign like we’re in
now. If churches aren’t careful, all these efforts we go about doing can just exist to perpetuate
ourselves, making sure they serve those who are already a part of it. But if it’s all part of the
church’s service to the Lord who “seeks out and saves the lost,” then all of these structures, all of
these ministries, even this building becomes something less about perpetuating ourselves and
more about how we have been entrusted with gifts, material, spiritual, you name it, gifts to be put
to work for, as Paul’s letter to the Ephesians puts it, equipping the saints for the work of
ministry.
And the most fascinating thing to me, when I think of the church in terms of planting sycamores, is that the person who planted the tree in Jericho had no idea that one day the Lord would be walking past it, and a desperate man would find his salvation in the encounter he had while perched in a tree that someone had planted long ago.

Let us go and do likewise. Let us pray.