Sermon: Climbing a Sycamore Tree

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, November 2, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Ever since when I was a child, in Sunday School, I've always liked the story of Zacchaeus. Here is a short stocky man, eager and wanting to see Jesus, but was unkindly blocked by a dismissing crowd. So he devised an ingenious solution—he climbed a sycamore tree. While perching on top of the tree, he saw Jesus. More importantly, Jesus saw him, praised him, welcomed him, and stayed at his home. Wonderful!

Perhaps I saw a little bit of myself in Zacchaeus. I was and still is short in stature. I have always been resourceful, and do not give up easily. More importantly, I loved climbing trees—well, not now, but at least when I was a trouble-making kid. Climbing a sycamore tree has always been to me, symbolically, a way of overcoming obstacles to get to what I wanted, hoped and dreamed. Zacchaeus was my childhood hero.

I didn't quite understand the implication of him being a tax-collector. I knew it was somewhat an unpopular profession—I mean, who likes a tax-man, then or now. But someone's got to do it. The fact that Jesus did not discriminate, good on the Lord. The fact that Zacchaeus spontaneously, without prompting, declared his willingness to give half of his possession to help the poor, and furthermore, to pay back four times the amount he may have defrauded, good on the tax-collector. A tax-collector with a conscience. My hero!

I don't think going through three-and-a-half-year of seminary study had really changed my view on Zacchaeus that much. That story, in its naive form stay pretty much the same to me, with perhaps an added layer of spiritualizing the act climbing a sycamore tree. Instead of simply overcoming obstacles, it becomes the act of pursuing faith, much like Paul's instruction in Philippians 2:12, "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling"—the pursuit of faith is to be done diligently and faithfully.

For reason unclear to myself, I've never preached on this story, as recorded in Luke 19. For close to 20 years of pastoral ministry and 10 years of youth ministry before that, I've yet to have the pleasure. This story

of Zacchaeus climbing a sycamore tree stayed in my mind, innocent, just like the children song,

> "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he.
> He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see.
> And as the saviour passed that way, he looked up in the tree.
> And he said, "Zacchaeus, you come down.
> For I'm going to your house today.
> For I'm going to your house today.""

It would've stayed innocent, that's until I started to look into the whole system of tax collection in the time of Jesus. I had assumed, wrongly, that tax collectors were employees of the Roman Empire, much like civil servants working for Revenue Canada. As I discovered and explained partly, in last week's sermon, tax collectors were more like independent contractors, who would pay the Empire a set fee, for the right to collect however much taxes as they could muster in a given territory. They more they collected, they more they enriched their own pockets.

The method of collection deserves also our scrutiny. Unlike the Canadian system which relies mostly on an honour system of self-reporting, these 1st century tax collectors would barge into people's homes and places of business, with armed escort of Roman soldiers, and forcibly shake people down for artificially inflated tax debts. One can only imagine the violence and the injustice that greedy tax collectors had hoisted upon a defenceless population, in the first century Israel/Palestine.

The genius of this system lies in the wide berth that Rome accorded tax collectors, as long as the pre-determined fees kept on pouring in, the imperial authority would often turn a blind eye to whatever methodologies were used. Pax Romana sounded good in theory, and only to the uber rich. The tax collectors themselves soon figured out it is no good to be out there alone; it is better to be organized, strength in numbers, more efficient, able to cover a much wider area. So a pyramid scheme developed overtime, with new recruits doing the grunt work of breaking down doors, collecting and funnelling tax revenue up the chain to the more seasoned collectors, until all the way up to the chief tax collector.

The chief tax collector would've been the most shrewd, cruel and ruthless business man imaginable, winner of this ungodly rat race, perching on the very top. Zacchaeus was that man, the chief tax collector, perched

on top of a sycamore tree. As noted by Brain Bantum, theology professor, author, and contributor to the Christian Century magazine in the June 2022 issue, “Zacchaeus doesn't mind the indignity of scrambling up a tree, as long as he’s on top.”

When I was in seminary study, fellow students would sometimes gather and pose challenging questions about ministry to each other. I recall one particular question: Would I as a minister accept donations from questionable sources, perhaps from ill gotten gains? I recall my first instinct was to say no, I would never knowing accept donations from sources, from individuals that I know to be conducting illegal or unethical activities. In those early days, I was pretty clear on my own ethical standards, pretty black and white. Of course, the point is hypothetical and moot, presbyterian ministers generally don’t handle donations, for a multitude of good reasons.

Well, when I was actually ministering to a Taiwanese Presbyterian congregation in Montreal, there was a parishioner who ran a rather successful import/export business. He had homes and stores in both Montreal and Vancouver, and travelled frequently for business in other Canadian cities too. He was incredibly generous, to the congregation, to others and to me as well. We had enjoyed quite a number of fancy meals together, all at his expense of course. We got along quite well.

For as long as I’d known him, he was always in trouble with Revenue Quebec. He had endured a number of audits, fines, lawsuits and appeals with the government agency. It was like a never ending game of cat and mouse chase. Of all our conversations on life, family, church and God, I never did ask him why he didn’t simply pay the taxes he owed. Taxes, like death, is not a subject one broaches with any degree of ease. Besides, with some degree of shame, I could’t even convince my own father to be honest with paying his own taxes—that is still a touchy subject in my family.

It is with that ethical conundrum in mind, that I turn to Zacchaeus’ offer of half of his wealth to help the poor, and to payback fours times more than the amount he defrauded. To say his accumulated wealth was ill-gotten is an understatement. To say his spontaneous generosity was a true sign of his repentance may be a bridge too far for me. The real problem I have with Zacchaeus, is his lack of commitment to dismantle the entire tax-collecting scheme he had built, overseen, and benefited handsomely.

A true repentance should be more than a proclamation to change. A true repentance should lead to a lasting reconciliation that overturns a system of injustice, and builds a fair and equitable reality for not just a few,

but for many. Zacchaeus didn't do that. As matter of fact, after meeting Jesus, we have no indication, no way of knowing if this chief tax collector actually held up to his end of the bargain. Zacchaeus simply disappeared from the biblical account, never to be mentioned again. Would it surprise you to find a shrewd, cruel and ruthless businessman over-promises and under-delivers? In that scenario, Zacchaeus would turn from hero to zero.

At the risk of sounding too negative and souring on this wonderful Gospel account, the key, I think, in this story rests in the declaration of Jesus at the end, in verse 10, "*For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.*" The true hero in this story was never Zacchaeus but Jesus.

For indeed Jesus sought out Zacchaeus, invited himself to the home of this chief tax collector. Against all convention and tradition, Jesus had no qualm about being the guest of one who is a sinner, a great sinner at that. He did not preach, he did not rebuke, he did not belittle, he did not shame. The Lord took the first step in reconciliation, even before Zacchaeus was ready to repent or to reconcile.

The initiative was and still is in Jesus' hand. Much like Zacchaeus was two thousand years ago, we are all lost in our own ways. Our ability to recognize our own sinfulness—questionable. Our sincerity to repent from being lost—waxes and wanes. Our capability to deliver ourself from lostness—all but non-existent. Yet, in spite of all that, Jesus is still seeking. He is standing at the door of our heart, knocking gently. He does not judge, he does not condemn, that may come one day, but for now, he searches and seeks, beckoning us to open that door, so he will stay at our house, and dwell in us, abide with us.

Climbing that sycamore tree is only the first step. The journey of faith is not a linear progression. We may promise to repent at first, then regretted the promise later. That is how fickle humanity is, for many of us, for much of the time. In the journey of faith, we may find ourselves taking two steps forward then three steps back. There is a term for that, called backsliding, but I think that's ok. So long as we know that Jesus journeys with us. When need be, Jesus is beckoning us to follow, as he leads the way. That indeed is good news.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen**.