

The short one: Luke 19:1-10

by [Roberta Bondi](#) in the [October 19, 2004](#) issue

Once there was a short, rich, bad man in Jericho named Zacchaeus. He heard that Jesus was coming to town, and he really wanted to see him. Unfortunately, the crowds around Jesus were thick and Zacchaeus was short, so he couldn't see. Then Zacchaeus had an idea. He would climb a sycamore tree. Fortunately, Jesus spied him up in the tree and invited himself to dinner. Zacchaeus was so happy that he volunteered to make good all the financial harm he had done. At this point, Jesus declared him saved.

This is the tale of Zacchaeus as we've all heard it—a short bad man climbing a sycamore tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. It is the story as I knew it until I heard Charlie Cook preach on it one Sunday in the mid-'70s. Charlie was the pastor of the United Methodist Church I attended when I lived in South Bend, Indiana, where I taught. He was a short good man, and one of the most extraordinary pastors I have ever known. Here is the way he told it:

There was once a bad, rich man in Jericho named Zacchaeus who heard that Jesus was coming to town and wanted to see him very much. When Jesus arrived, however, the crowds were thick and Jesus was short, so Zacchaeus couldn't see him. Then he hit on an idea. He would climb a sycamore tree.

I remember asking Charlie how he decided that Jesus was the short one in Luke's story. "I can't prove that he was," he answered me. "But look it up in the Greek. You really can't tell who 'he' refers to . . . As far as I am concerned, however . . . Jesus was the short one."

Needless to say, with all the other good points to discuss in this gospel reading, it might seem strange to stop at this apparently minor one. Do we even care whether it was Jesus or Zacchaeus who was short?

On my refrigerator is a favorite cartoon, cut from the *New Yorker* magazine many years ago. It is a picture of a small, balding, middle-aged, skinny white guy in a loin

cloth sitting on a throne beneath a sign that says “God.” A puzzled middle-aged white guy is standing in front of him and staring as he says something to God like, “You know, you don’t look a bit like your picture.”

What makes the cartoon funny, of course, is the fact that although we tell ourselves we know that God has no body, and that it doesn’t matter what Jesus, whom Christians say is God incarnate, looks like, we all have our deeply entrenched images, and we are attached to them for very good reasons: our images of God tell us something important about who we are and who we ought to be. I know this is not news to anybody right now; the liberation movements of the past few decades have rightly made it clear how destructive white, male images of God the Father and Jesus have been for large portions of the nonwhite and/or nonmale Christian populations of the world.

I find myself profoundly—appropriately—moved by an African crucifix, as well as by images of the crucified Jesus portrayed as a woman, but Charlie’s account of the Zacchaeus story reminds me of where my imagination is still lacking. When I find it funny to think of a nerdy bald God or of Zacchaeus as short, it’s because I am still trapped in unrealistic cultural ideals of the perfect man and woman.

When I idealize Jesus and rob him of a real humanity which he shares with us I do him no favors, and I demoralize myself besides. That I usually don’t even recognize I am doing it is probably what makes my favorite bumper sticker funny: “Jesus would have used his turn signal!” I can’t picture Jesus driving around in an ordinary car like mine, going to the grocery store on an ordinary road, and I pay for it.

Thirty years ago when my daughter, Anna Grace, was five, she crept up to me in the kitchen one day while I was cooking dinner. When I looked down at her, I saw that there was a wrinkle above her round brown eyes and her little braids were hanging limply.

“What’s the matter, Anna Grace?” I asked her with alarm.

She put her arms around my legs, hugged them hard and mumbled into them. “Mama, is it really true that when Jesus was a little boy, he always kept his room clean and he always, always, always did what he was told?”

Surprised but instantly knowing what she was really asking me, I answered, “No, of course it isn’t, Anna Grace. He was a real child just like you are. I’m sure he was

messy some of the time, and I'm positive he didn't always do what he was told."

"Really?" she asked again. "Yes, really," I replied. She looked at me uncertainly for a minute. Then, the wrinkle above her nose disappeared and the ends of her pigtails curled up again as she went off into the still messy room she had been sent to straighten.

In spite of all the depictions of Jesus as tall, manly and good-looking that we have received through the centuries as part of our Christian tradition, and in spite of our popular imagination that depicts Jesus—and God—in culturally idealized forms that have nothing to do with real people, there is something to Christians' early identification of the Christ in the passage of Isaiah that speaks of the Anointed One as possessing no physical beauty or particular desirability that would inevitably attract us to him.

I don't know about you, but I believe Charlie was right. Jesus really must have been short.