

The courage to climb a tree (Luke 19:1-10)

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What invisible wounds does a person sustain through a life of cheating others? Selfish existence is a cancer of the heart that metastasizes to the mind and spirit. Conceptions of the good life are often propped up on the pillars of more money, more sex, and more resources--a crude case of materialism that maims.

Zacchaeus, a plutocratic chief tax collector, keeps gaining more and stealing more--he builds a public persona around excess. A Jew who works for Rome, he gains material wealth at the expense of his community. He is despised and alienated, wounded by the wages of his work.

But Zacchaeus hungers for something beyond his life preying on his own people. What happens when life's call for more is issued not from your bank or business, but from your being--the very essence of identity? When your life calls for more, you have to search for it, doggedly and creatively. Zacchaeus abandons the available trappings of his current life--with its abundance and alienation, inventory and insults, possessions and pains--to climb a tree.

All opportunities for authentic life require some shift in you. Sometimes you have to struggle to a new height, away from the crowded ground level, to gain new vision. When Zacchaeus climbs the tree, he abandons the pretensions that paralyzed him. With every reach and step, he resists the weight of his past. At ground level, he can't see what's possible--so he climbs to where he can.

What chauffeurs him from the ground to the tree is the very thing that distinguishes him: his height. Limitations can inspire creativity. Zacchaeus converts his so-called deficiency into an opportunity to see what others cannot. This plants him in a place ripe for encountering the divine.

Paul Tillich says that "being religious means asking passionately the question of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers, even if the answers hurt." Zacchaeus's answer is in this ordinary tree, although he is uncertain whether Jesus will even notice him. This short man resiliently climbs a tree, inviting the mockery of people already biased against him. It takes courage to look this foolish. Zacchaeus needs to climb, because the crowded ground level offers more of the same sights that have been wounding him.

In the midst of Zacchaeus's victims and detractors, Jesus announces, "Today salvation has come to his house for he is a son of Abraham." Jesus declares a new type of healing for the invisible wounds the world cannot see. Zacchaeus is free to see himself as a child of covenant. Jesus' declaration is a license for him to restart, reimagine, and revolutionize his life--with an identity that enables him to reach beyond his mistakes, beyond his occupation, beyond his infractions.

"You belong!" says Jesus, to Zacchaeus and to us. "You are enough."