



## SUNDAY SERMON

# Excited

*The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 19, verses 1-10*

*Jesus 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 will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will 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."*

Come, Holy Spirit – take these words and make the word of life for us. Amen.

When do you remember last being excited about Jesus? Was it as a child in Sunday School? At a youth mission trip? Holding your child, or your grandchild for the first time? Sitting over a loved one's sick bed? Enjoying a sublime worship experience? Was it this morning? Is it now?

I'm not asking when we were last grateful to God. I'm wondering when do we remember being excited about Jesus. Jesus is the way God revealed God's self in the human story—that's what we claim. Jesus makes God personal.

Zacchaeus was excited about Jesus, excited enough to climb a tree. He must have heard things – those miracles, the authority of his teaching. And deep within the corrosive shell of a man who lived off the misery of others, was a child who wanted something Jesus might have to offer.

Zacchaeus was not a nice man. We hear about him being short and climbing up a tree to see Jesus better, and we remember that Sunday School ditty, "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he ..." and we think, "Oh, isn't that cute?" Zacchaeus was not cute. For starters, he was a tax collector. Last week we heard a parable Jesus told about a fictional tax collector. This week, we meet the real thing.

Tax collectors were considered the lowest form of life by their fellow Jews, hated collaborators in the oppressive Roman tax system. Anytime the Romans wanted to pay for a new war or a new monument, they squeezed a little more from their subjects by excessive taxes. They used Jews to collect the taxes – who added a surcharge for themselves. You could not be a tax collector without also being an extortioner and embezzler and collaborator with the occupying forces. It was the way the system was wired.

And here's Zacchaeus—a chief tax collector in the big town of Jericho, he's at the top of a pyramid of extortion and violence, taking a cut from all the tax collectors under him ... He must be very, very good at his despicable job. Think Danny DeVito as a mob boss, and you get a picture of this loathsome guy.

Yet he climbs a tree to see Jesus pass through town. That could mean two things—one, he's curious. But he also wants to remain hidden, at a safe distance. But God had a surprise for him: Jesus stops right under his tree, looks up and says, "Zach! I'm coming to your house today!" After that, nothing was the same.

*Continued*

### DATE

The Twenty-Fourth  
Sunday after Pentecost  
Sun., Oct. 30, 2016

### PREACHER

The Rev. Dr. Kate Heichler

### READINGS

Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4  
Psalm 32:1-8  
II Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12  
Luke 19:1-10

Now, that was kind of a “third rail” move on Jesus’ part, politically. To say he’s going to be the guest of a wicked person? That wicked? No way! But Jesus was never interested in popularity contests. He was—and is—interested in transformation, in restoring all things and all people to wholeness. And up in that tree was a very, very broken man. And when Jesus invited himself to Zachaeus’ house, something broke open in him.

Now, I think he made a space in his spirit when he climbed up that tree. It was a tiny opening, perhaps, maybe not even conscious to him, but a chink appeared in the armor of that tough man. And Jesus saw that space, and opened it a little further when he responded. And once that space was open; once Zachaeus encountered an acceptance and forgiveness that was completely unmerited – repentance began to flow. He was forgiven first, and then he repented. It’s not always one way.

Jesus chose him. Jesus chose to honor this dishonorable man with his presence. He didn’t ask him to change first; he asked nothing of Zaccheus but hospitality. He accepted him, with all his sinfulness and greed and the real damage he did to others. Others were horrified, but Jesus knew what he was doing. And that acceptance did something to Zaccheus. It changed him. And then he was freed up to give. Half of his fortune he wanted to give to the poor, and he wanted to make fourfold restitution to anyone he had cheated. No one told him he had to do that. There was no, “You release your money and then I’ll bless you.” The blessing came first. When we get excited about Jesus, our generosity is released.

I was once visiting a friend in South Carolina, who lived on an old rice plantation. He was forever trying to move the water around, draining this pond and filling that one. And we were driving around, looking at the grounds, when he stopped. Damn those beavers!, he said, noticing that one pond he was trying to drain into another had stopped draining. The beavers had started to damn the grate on the pipe connecting the ponds underwater.

He got out and grabbed this long-handled thing with a hook on the end, and starting fishing around by the grate, pulling bits of grass and muck out and flinging them onto the ground. This looked like fun, and he had two of these hook things, so I got out and joined him, and there we were, flinging muck. And then my hook got caught, and wouldn’t move. And I pulled, and pulled, and pulled, and wham! Out comes this giant wad of mud and grass. And as soon as it came out, whoosh! You could hear the water begin to flow again. All those little bits of muck and mud had to be removed before the big one.

Right then and there I knew God had given me a sermon illustration for the rest of my life, a wonderful way to understand the work of repentance and healing. God’s living water wants to flow—when we remove the dams, it flows.

A later “Zacchaeus” was John Newton, who wrote the hymn “Amazing grace.” Many of us know his story—he was a slave trader, as horrible a profession as we can imagine; as horrible in his time as tax collecting was in Zaccheus’ time. More horrible, for many people were killed. Of course, they weren’t considered fully human – just a business loss. Newton made a lot of money in that murderous enterprise. And he was a nominal Christian, as most slave-traders were. But when he finally came to real faith in Jesus Christ, when he let Christ into his heart, he was overwhelmed by that amazing grace he encountered, “*that saved a wretch like me/ I once was lost, but now am found ...*” “*The Son of Man came to seek and save the lost,*” said Jesus.

John Newton came to realize he couldn’t continue in the business that had made him rich. Like Zaccheus, he first encountered the unconditional love and grace of Jesus. And then his life changed.

It’s Reformation Sunday, so I have to give a shout-out to Martin Luther. He was not a notorious sinner—but he thought he was. He couldn’t get out from under the weight of sin.

And when he finally experienced the amazing grace of Christ, that living water was so powerfully released in him, it brought reformation and new life to a dead and corrupt church. The movement of God is always toward freedom. When we have a real encounter with God—whether in healing, or forgiveness, or an experience of love, or worship, or some extraordinary engagement with nature – we are released to want to give.

This happened for me at a church conference, of all things. I was so blown away by the caliber of the thinkers and speakers—people who made me think about God and church in new ways. And I got so filled with gratitude and excitement about what God was up to, that after one talk, just sitting in my seat in the auditorium, I thought, “I’m going to start tithing!”

At my church in New York, the tithe was always taught, and some people did it. I couldn’t imagine it, because I was doing the math instead of feeling the love. But there, feeling so full of God’s love, I got an idea for how I would tithe—when I went to the bank, while the teller was processing my deposit (you can tell this was in the dark ages), I would write a check to the church for 10 percent of whatever went in. That 10 percent be out before it ever went in.

But more than that, going to the bank with my paycheck became a joyful thing. I really enjoyed that faith exercise each month. It's harder to do with direct deposit, but finding a ritual for our giving, for taking that step of faith each week or month becomes a little adventure with God—when we feel how much God loves us. It came off the top, in gratitude, and I never missed it. I always had plenty. And it wasn't because I "should." And it wasn't because "My church needs the money." It was because God is so good and I was so filled with that awareness. It was because I was excited about Jesus.

Now, that's a feeling, that can come and go. But feelings can lead us into adopting spiritual practices that endure no matter what's going on in our lives, or who the rector is, or what we're getting out of church. Our giving is connected to our excitement about Jesus—who he was, who he is in our lives, what he is doing around us through the Holy Spirit.

What is the most exciting thing that Jesus is doing in or through St. Columba's? Where are you experiencing the power and love of God? Would you take a moment and tell the person sitting next to you? You don't have to – we live by grace; but if you're not too shy to say two words, please do. And if you are too shy, please take a moment to tell God.

Once that living water begins to flow, once we remove the obstacles, It cleanses and transforms everything in its path. Everything. Zacchaeus became a bearer of living water. We are bearers of that living water. You don't have to be a notorious sinner to be released into giving. A good Sunday among Christ's body at St. Columba's can do that too!

Are you excited about Jesus? Let it flow!

Amen!