

## Unraveled: Rethinking Vocation

The Rev. Renée Marie Rico  
Faith Presbyterian Church, Sierra Vista, AZ  
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Luke 19: 1-10

Let's start with the story. We start with this man Zaccheus who is trying to see Jesus who is on his way to Jerusalem. Zaccheus doesn't have friends, just clients, and angry ones at that. Zaccheus is a man who does the dirty work for Herod, collecting taxes, enforcing payment. Because of this – he is pretty much an outcast. People say he cheats (tax collectors did, and you can imagine what a chief tax collector did); he's a sharp competitor. He's rich; not many are. Zaccheus is a rich collaborator with the Roman-backed government that is occupying Judah, the land where the Jews live.

So let's be clear: Zaccheus not the kind of man you invite home to dinner or buy a drink for in the local bar. Zaccheus may have a nice house but no one visits there, no one drops by and says, "I was just wondering how you were doing, Zach." What does such a man think about at the end of the day? What does he hope? What does he wish? I think of him as a man who has become isolated. He has lots of things; he may not have lots of fun.

Zaccheus is curious like everyone else. I'm not sure from the text of this story whether it's Jesus or Zaccheus who is the short one. As someone who is vertically challenged, I can totally relate to the fact that when you're short, seeing is a problem. In my own yearnings, I kinda hope it was Jesus, you know, because our image of Jesus in Western culture is tall, fair and thin. *That* Jesus comes out of Hollywood central casting. But I'll admit, it is a little disturbing to think that Jesus looks less like Brad Pitt and more like Danny Devito.

Moving on, Zaccheus climbs a tree, a sycamore tree. It's not a big tree, but it has lots of branches and there he sits, all alone, up in his tree, waiting for this Jesus to come past, waiting for a glimpse of...what? What exactly did Zaccheus hope to see? The story says, "He wanted to see who Jesus was."

Isn't that in a sense what we all want? Sunday after Sunday we worship, whether in the sanctuary, or now in our homes, hoping to get a glimpse of Jesus. All over this community, all over everywhere, Christians are in churches where they will hear stories, just like us, hoping to see Jesus.

And he's "up a tree"? Gosh, that feels current doesn't it? I know that we are slowly opening Arizona now, but we are still in the season of COVID-19, and will be for a while.

Whatever Zaccheus hoped, up there in his tree, surely he wasn't prepared for what happened. Jesus is walking past, the center of this crowd, people are yelling prices, people are calling questions, people are asking for healing, it's a noisy crowd and suddenly he stops and the noise must have stopped too. Just that moment of stillness, right there, right under the tree, and Jesus looks up and sees this man, this lonely little man, up a tree. And right there, right then, he smiles and speaks. We don't really know what was said; did he greet him: "Shalom"? Luke says he called out, "Zaccheus, come down, I must stay at your house today."

What went on in Zaccheus in that moment? What went on or might go on in you when someone calls you out of your tree? There's a low murmur from the crowd; they know there are a lot of people in Jericho who deserve this special recognition more than this tax collector. He's not one of us, he's not a good man, he doesn't go to worship, he doesn't pay his tithe, he doesn't do right. "Jesus! Some Messiah! Look, off to have dinner with that sinner!" they say. The crowd looks at Zaccheus and sees just this: the difficult man who doesn't fit in.

But Jesus sees something else. To Jesus, Zaccheus is a son of Abraham, of the covenant promises that go back to the faith father Abraham where God blesses Abraham with countless descendants. Zaccheus is therefore a child of God, a person God meant to make a blessing. This is how Jesus sees Zaccheus; whatever Zaccheus sees, this is what Jesus sees in him.

Zaccheus comes down and then we find out something pretty amazing – and here is where our English translation fails us – because the NRSV says that Zaccheus says "I will give half of my possessions, and I will return 4 times of what I may have defrauded."

That's how most of us have heard the story. The original Greek actually says that Zaccheus is already doing these things -

**"I am giving away half of my possessions,"  
and  
"I am returning 4 times what I have stolen."**

In other words, a different possible reading of this story is that it is about the discovery is that Zaccheus is already transformed, but nobody was giving him the credit for doing so. Zaccheus was lost because of the judgments of the society, not because he was as bad as everyone made him out to be.

In this exchange, his life changed, not because he saw Jesus, but because he saw Jesus seeing him truly. Because Jesus came to him and called him out of his tree. “Come down, Zaccheus”. This is what Jesus does: he comes to people, some are lost, some are waiting to be found. He comes to them and sees them and helps them see themselves in a new way, and for the community to see them anew as well. All learn to see the child of God in them.

We may have some work to do – because I think maybe it’s we look at getting “recalled.” Not in the sense of the product recall, that assumes that things are defective, like a car or a coffee maker, but in the sense of this – what is God calling us to do in this time of COVID-19? What are we as individuals called to do? How might we reach out to more people than we have, even though we are not gathering each Sunday in the sanctuary.

Getting re-called means going on a journey. And we get called and recalled to go on these in the least likely ways you can imagine.

Ordinary people are called to do extraordinary things.

And not a one of them expecting it.

Not a one of them planning on it.

Not a one of them really prepared for it.

We'd like to think it was otherwise.

We'd like to think that God picks certain people out,

And there is something special about those people.

Not like us. We're nothing special.

God won't be calling us in the night, or even in the middle of the day.

So we're safe. We can go about our business, feeling secure that we're not qualified to be called by God.

Who are we to stand up for righteousness? Who are we to fix problems in our community? Who are we to figure out how to find new skills for living in a constantly changing world? Why would God call any of us?

Well, I think God has a sense of humor about these things. One year, not long after I was ordained as a pastor, I got an email from someone that I went to high school for a band reunion. I emailed her back letting her know kindly and gently that I was a pastor now, thinking my news was going to be rather shocking to her.

Ha! She wrote back immediately to tell me to sit down because, she said, you’re never gonna believe this, “given my roadie, smoking around the corner, drinking in the car,

always pushing the limits -high school days,” and she told me: she’s now a parole officer in the midwest.

Yep, God’s calls can have a sense of irony about them. God calls you, too. A call is anything about making a life worth living, making meaning of our lives, taking meaning into our lives. God’s calls are about finding the holy in living and passionately working for that.

Sometimes we wait, just like what happened to Jonah. But if it is a call, it’ll come around again, a “recall” of a very different sort.

See, I believe that God is constantly whispering calls to us. Big calls, like commit to this career, or this person, or this big issue in the world. Maybe you’ve been getting a call for a long time and haven’t risked living it out. Maybe you’ve been waiting for the right time for the call to be realized. Maybe you’re just now tuning in to the perfect call from God for this chapter in your life.

But calls don’t have to be big and splashy. Sometimes a call is small but significant. A call from the church to teach what it means to be in relationship with God, or help with the schools, or help a friend or neighbor to clean up after flooding, or bring a meal to someone who’s unable to cook, or find a new group to connect with about God. Calls usually require a bit of a stretch – like Zaccheus hosting Jesus at his house.

But one thing we know. God is calling, and maybe recalling us to follow him around the next bend.

Amen.