

THE QUESTION OF THE WEEK

“Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector (of Jericho), a wealthy man but...short of stature. When he heard that Jesus was coming he ran ahead to climb a sycamore tree.”

Luke 19: 2

I didn't know what a sycamore tree was until I went to the Holy Land and actually saw some of them. What is interesting is that the sycamore tree doesn't just grow straight up like most trees. The trunk actually grows at an angle to the ground, almost sideways, and it is very easy to step right onto the trunk and walk along the trunk and around where the branches are. You don't have to hoist yourself up the side of some tree. Many people climb sycamore trees in order to be able to see because they are so easy to climb, very accessible and available. No one would be surprised to see people in a sycamore along a parade route for example because everybody wants to see what is going on.

What would be surprising, though, would be to see a very well dressed man climbing in such a tree. That would be most unusual. That would stick out. It would be incongruous. Because important people do not act like ordinary people. Or at least that is what we think. But in this gospel story, this particular wealthy man doesn't care anymore how he looks even if he looks silly and people point at him and make fun of him. Zacchaeus doesn't care about public perception. He cares about seeing Jesus because he has heard about Jesus. Jesus has actually met with other groups of tax collectors in other towns. AND he did not simply condemn them but rather invited them to begin to live a different way than they had been living. This Jesus did not come so much as judge but rather to give hope to people who had lost all reason for hope. And when you feel hopeless and then suddenly someone throws you a lifeline, you don't hesitate. You grab the line. You climb the tree. You do what you have to.

What does Zacchaeus do? He gives half of all he owns to the poor and he repays anyone he cheated four times what he stole from them. That is the sign of a changed man. It isn't about the money anymore. It isn't about the perception anymore. It is about the truth and what Jesus has come to bring with him—hope, to those who had none. Has that ever been you? That is the question of the week.