

“A Wee Little Man”  
Luke 19:1-10  
October 31, 2010

When my sister and I were little girls, our babysitter was Carla - the choice babysitter for all children in our hometown. And, Carla was a dwarf. She stood only a little over three feet tall. Children loved her, and she loved them. I have never seen anybody any better with children than Carla. Part of it was her size. She had all the authority of an adult. She had all the wisdom of an adult. She was an adult, but at our eye level. We literally could see eye to eye with Carla. When she wanted us to do something, she did not have to kneel down to tell us – she was already there. She knew what it was to be little, and she understood the difficulties that arise from being short – she understood not being able to see, not being able to reach things, not being able to have your feet touch the floor – she GOT what it was like to be a small child.

Whenever I read about Zacchaeus, I wonder if the wee little man was as little as Carla. I can imagine that – can’t you? Somebody like Danny DeVito jumping up and down, pitching a fit because he can’t see for all of the people, and when it became clear that those people were not going to LET him see, I can picture him shimmying up a tree and crawling out on a limb like a panda bear to catch a glimpse of Jesus. That has been my Zacchaeus visual for 42 years. But, I read something this week that blew 42 years worth of biblical imagination about this wee little man out of the water. I hope when I share it with you, I don’t instigate a called board meeting to address the great theological crisis that I’m about to give you. In Luke 19:3, we get the phrase “he was short in stature.” I think you are like me. I think you always took that “short in stature” to refer to Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus, they told you in Sunday School, was the a wee little man, a wee little man was he. A little man so short that he had to climb up a sycamore tree to get a good look at Jesus parading through the wealthy, bustling city of Jericho.

But, and cover your ears if a different interpretation is going to be blasphemous for you, what they could have told you is that, in the original language of the Gospel, in the Greek, that phrase “he was small of stature” could apply to Jesus. It can read, “Zacchaeus sought to see who Jesus was but could not on account of the crowd because he (Zacchaeus) was short of stature.” But, it could also legitimately be read, “Zacchaeus sought to see who Jesus was but could not on account of the crowd because he (Jesus) was short in stature.” Oh my!

What if Jesus was the short one? What if Jesus was so short that Big Man Zacchaeus couldn’t see the little bitty rabbi for the crowd? What if Jesus was so short that when Zacchaeus climbed that tree, he only got a view of the top of the Messiah’s head?

It is possible. We know nothing for sure about the physical characteristics of Jesus. I haven’t found anything in the Bible that gives us specific details. We have Isaiah 53 which tells us there is nothing remarkable about his appearance, so I went to a greater authority: the internet, specifically, wikipedia.org—they talk about his possible date of birth, his possible date of death, and his teachings – but nothing about his eyes or his nose or his weight or his height.

What if he was short? What if Jesus was the wee little man? Would his appearance make him any less authoritative? Would his height make his work any less important? Would it make anybody less likely to listen to him? I don’t know, but I can tell you this. When Carla laid down the law, we did not give her a whole lot of lip – her ability to be right at our level and speak the truth somehow gave her even more authority because we trusted her. She did not look down on us. She did not point her finger down on us. She was one of us...only better.

And, that fits right into God's story of dealing with the likes of us. In short, we were created. We messed up. God created a beautiful garden with plenty to eat and good company to keep, and it was not enough. God gave us a fresh start – wiped everything out – gave us a clean slate, and it was not enough. So, God sent us a covenant – gave us laws to live by and ways to be with him and with each other, and it was not enough. So, God gave us tall, BIG kings to tell us what to do and to keep us pointed in the right direction, and it was not enough. So, God sent us prophets to tell us what we were doing wrong and to warn us that we needed to do right, and it was not enough. Nothing that God tried got people's attention, so God decided to go with what? A baby. Babies get attention! Let one coo in here and I see a wave of smiling faces turn in that direction! God was brilliant with that. He changed things up. Instead of coming as a BIG DADDY CHIEF God on a chariot in the clouds, he said, "Honey, I shrunk my kid," and he sent Jesus in as a little baby – right at our level.

So, it would not surprise me – given God's tactics – if Jesus as the adult were NOT the size of a professional football player, but instead, the size of a hobbit – no physical threat to anybody. And, when he walked through the crowds, you had to look close and you had to look down, and you still might miss him because all kinds of things and all kinds of people stand taller than Jesus and speak louder than Jesus. That certainly happens today. Just last week, the N&O ran an article from the Los Angeles Times called "Walking Away from Church." The article gave a lot of statistics, but the most troubling was that between 25- and 30% of people in their 20's have no religious affiliation – that's higher than any previous generation – no interest in being a part of the Body of Christ. And, do you know the reason that they gave for their lack of enthusiasm about Christianity and all of us Christians? It's kind of a sticking point for this time of year. The reason they gave was that they see more politics in church than Jesus –not just on one side, but on all sides - on all LOUD sides. But, I would argue that politics is only one of MANY things that crowd Jesus out. There are also rules that beat out God's mercy. And, fears. And, bigotry. And, flat apathy. What is it for you? What voice speaks louder than Jesus? Is it a voice from without telling you what you SHOULD do, or a voice from within telling you what you will never be worthy of doing. What worries us more than Jesus? What sparks our creativity and gets our heart pumping more than Jesus? It's worth pondering. For the crowds in Zacchaeus' day, they got really inspired about who Jesus ought to be and who Jesus ought to love and who Jesus ought to visit, and those beliefs were so strong and so vocal that they formed a wall that blocked others from seeing Jesus for themselves, and every time the Zac Attack tries to squeeze into the crowd, to try to catch a word from Jesus, he hits that human wall –all those people moving together just enough to keep him out.

But, in their defense, Zacchaeus was a bad man – he cheated these people, he hurt these people, he made his living from pounds of their flesh, and they probably enjoy having some control over this tax collector for once – they probably take pride in protecting their values from a deviant like him. So, they don't make room for him. I have to hand it to Zacchaeus. He does not give up. If he can't see Jesus in a respectable way, he opts for the ridiculous – run and climb! This grown man in his Armani suit runs ahead of the crowd at full speed and climbs a tree just to see Jesus. That lets you know two things about Zacchaeus. One, he may not be able to name it, but he knows something is missing in his life. He's got the 'stuff' of good living, but something keeps him awake at night, something puts a knot in the pit of stomach...something is not right. And, two, he does not know much about Jesus, but Jesus is the only possibility of hope that he's dared to dream of in a long time. So, who cares what that crowd thinks? He's running head. He is climbing that tree, and as God is his witness, he's going to see Jesus.

But, what actually happens is the reverse. Jesus sees HIM. Zacchaeus, as far as we know, does not wave his hands wildly and scream out and beg Jesus to come to his house. He's just peeping out of the branches – trying to eyeball Jesus before even beginning to ponder what this might mean for his life. But, Jesus will have none of that wishy-washy discernment process. He walks right up to that tree, tells Zacchaeus to come down from there right this minute, and then he invites himself over for dinner. Zacchaeus is thrilled – so thrilled that he will give half of what he has to the poor, and pay back four times what he owes the people he has defrauded.

The obvious preacher-like question from this text is could we get that excited? How far 'out on a limb' are we willing to go to see Jesus? Could we abandon money and careers to make things right with Jesus? Could we joyfully welcome Jesus into our home and into our lives and into our relationships? Zacchaeus did and this is a story about what this wee little man did and what we ought to be inspired to do. No! Wrong wee little man!

Jesus clearly says what this is all about, and it's not anything that Zacchaeus does. "Salvation has come to this house. Me. Salvation. I have come to seek and save the lost. That's you – lost." According to Luke, that was that. Zacchaeus took one look at him, and ok - no angst, no drama, no backward glances. It wasn't like old Zac had to decide to DO anything. It more like something happened to him, almost supernaturally beyond his control.

It's a miracle story. It's not about the power of wee little human beings to change their lives, to pull themselves out of the cesspool of sin and do better. This is a story about the power of God – to walk right up to the richest man in town and work a miracle, creating faith where there was no faith, creating a disciple where there was only a lunatic in a tree.

What a relief! This is not a story about expectations for us! This is a story about God, and God's ability not only to call us but also to create us as people who CAN to do things like give, serve, forgive, welcome the stranger - not because of how big our hearts are, but because he captures our hearts, because he interests us more than anything else in our lives. This is a story about being swept into the flow of God's salvation and giving ourselves over to it. That will be different for every one of us. Sometimes, salvation may mean climbing up a tree for a new perspective. Sometimes, salvation may mean doing something fresh with the money that passes through your hands. Sometimes, salvation may mean coming down out of the tree so that there is time to sit with Jesus and to watch together how the light changes the colors of the leaves in those trees. The possibilities are endless. Sometimes we will respond LARGE, and sometimes SMALL, but it would be a mistake to focus too hard on ourselves. The God who came as one of wee little us can be counted on to give us hearts that are generous, welcoming and able to follow wherever he leads. The choice is ours. But, know this, whenever and however our stubborn wills spill into the will of God, salvation has come to this house TODAY.