

17 January 2021
Genesis 1:26-28;
Luke 19:1-10
Reconciliation with
Ourselves
First Mennonite
Church

One day, a young turtle slowly began to climb a tree. After great effort, he reached the top, jumped into the air waving his front legs, and promptly fell to the ground with thud. He brushed himself



off, climbed the tree again, and again tried to fly with no success. The little turtle persisted again and again while two birds looked on with sorrow. Finally, one bird said to the other, "Honey, I think it's time to tell our son he's adopted."



Old Sycamore tree in Jericho that tradition says is the one that Zacchaeus climbed.

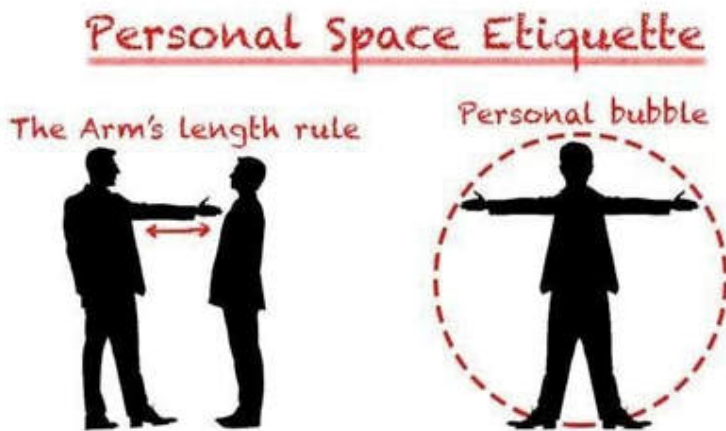
I tell you this "true" story because there was an event, the turtle fell out of a tree. And this event prompted the turtle's adopted parents to say something.

In this morning's reading from Luke, there was also an event which prompted Zacchaeus to do something. The event was Jesus passing through the ancient city of Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, and this prompted Zacchaeus to climb a sycamore tree so that he could see Jesus.

We've heard this story since we were children, and this is why we all know the answer to this simple question: why did Zacchaeus climb the tree?

The answer that immediately came to my mind was Zacchaeus climbed the tree because he was short in stature, couldn't see over the crowd, so he climbed the tree so that he could see Jesus. I think this was the answer I heard as a child. But what **actually motivated** Zacchaeus to find a suitable tree and climb it?

It's reasonable to assume that Zacchaeus **was curious** about seeing Jesus as Jesus had become very popular. But, when he arrived there were so many people lining the street, so he sought out a place that gave a short person like himself a better vantage point. Climbing a sycamore tree provided him that vantage point.



Did curiosity really motivate Zacchaeus? I don't think I would have ever probed this question like I did these past couple of weeks had I not lived in Asia for 20 years. To say that Zacchaeus was curious and climbed a tree in order to see Jesus is a very western cultural way of looking at this story. Canadians love their personal space and tend to be

comfortable with .5-1 metre (2-3 ft) of personal space during conversations. When we talk with others, most of us don't touch the person we are talking to. Of course, this may be different between good friends and family. When we walk-by someone and encroach on their personal space we say, excuse me. It's automatic. Natural.

Don't believe me? This isn't a good example since we are in a pandemic and are supposed to keep 2 metres apart, but think about how you lived before the pandemic began. What would happen if you went up to someone on the street and stopped within a foot of them and began talking to them—what do you think would happened? I imagine the other person would be shocked at having their personal space invaded. At best, they would step back in order to restore proper space. At worst...I'll let you decide.



China, for example, follows very different cultural rules. When my daughter was small, she learnt to push her way through crowds. She would just barge into a large crowd and gently push people out of the way. And people moved to the

side without giving it much thought. Culturally, that is what people do there. When we returned to Canada on our home leaves, we always reminded our children that what was absolutely fine behaviour in China was sometimes considered rude here.

After 20 years in Asia, I ask why Zacchaeus didn't just push through the crowd like my daughter pushed through crowds in Beijing? Why did he climb a tree in order to see Jesus? You see, the Bible gives us a tightly packed story, and we must use our imaginations, put on our thinking caps to unpack the details in order to discover what is going on.

One way to get at why Zacchaeus climbed a tree is to examine who Zacchaeus was. We don't know as much about Zacchaeus. We know that he was a chief tax collector, was wealthy, lived in Jericho-- one of the major tax-collecting centres in Palestine, was vertically challenged, and had an ability that most children would love to have—an ability to climb trees. Zacchaeus was a **chief tax collector** which meant he was the boss of many tax collectors. Being a boss would have given him social status and power.

You know from reading your Bible that tax collectors get a uniformly bad press in the gospels—and well they should. Not only did tax collectors collaborate with the enemy—the Roman occupation forces—but they often collected way more tax from the population than was necessary. None of us enjoy paying tax, but at least we have a system with some checks and balances. In contrast, the Roman tax system was open to wide-spread abuse because there were no laws to protect taxpayers like there is today.

Back then tax collectors were notorious for collecting way more tax than necessary from those who could least pay it, the widows and the orphans.

The bottom line. **Tax collectors were feared and deeply hated.** Think about that for a moment.

In our story, the writer Luke shares a very interesting detail which most of us overlook when reading the story. In verse 3 it says, *He [Zacchaeus] was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature* (Luke 19:3). Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem, was passing through Jericho, and many, many people knew about it and lined the road Jesus was on in order to catch a glimpse of him. There was no internet, email, or social media back then, but news still spread like wild fire, especially when it got into the hands of the local gossipers, Bertha or Bob. Every community has them, right? So, when news of Jesus passing through Jericho spread around Jericho everyone poured on to the street and lined the road. Zacchaeus, however, **arrived late**, after the crowd had already lined the street. He too wanted to see Jesus **but on account of the crowd he could not**. The reason he arrived late was that he wasn't connected to the community, wasn't part of the grape vine. Though he lived in Jericho, he wasn't connected to the community of Jericho, didn't have friends who were connected to the community. He was feared, hated, and ostracized from the community. As a result, he didn't hear about Jesus passing through Jericho until the last minute, and by then there were no open spots on the road.

Pushing his way through the crowd, like my daughter did in Beijing, would have been extremely dangerous for Zacchaeus as tax collectors were well known for pushing their weight around when collecting taxes for the hated Romans. Would you venture into a crowd who hated you? A question for us as FMC is, are there people who we would



absolutely not welcome into our midst? Did any of the US congress men and women venture into that angry crowd in Washington DC a week and a half ago to listen to their concerns? Of course, not! They were all hunkered down in fear of their lives! I think if Zacchaeus had tried to push his way to the front in order to see better, the crowd would have turned on him. A crowd can turn from joyous to angry in a moment, and individuals within a crowd can

do horrible things, things they would never ever do by themselves.

Why did the feared, hated, and ostracized Zacchaeus climb the sycamore tree? Because **he had no choice**. There was an event, Jesus passing through Jericho, and this prompted Zacchaeus to act. He was so motivated see Jesus that he spent time, energy, and took a great deal of personal risk, to see Jesus.

Curiosity? I think you'd need a bit more motivation to venture into a crowd of people who hated you than mere curiosity. There's an old proverb which says, curiosity killed the cat. Pushing through the crowd would have been the end of Zacchaeus. I believe there was something more going on in Zacchaeus' life, mind, consciously or unconsciously, that motivated him to go to that event and climb a tree, even at great personal risk. Climbing a tree wasn't a very dignified way of acting in light of his position, but there was something much more than just curiosity that motivated him to see Jesus. Was it a longing for something different in his life? A restlessness? An inner voice? Maybe it was his job—its demands that had turned him into someone he longer recognized? Maybe he found it hard to look at himself in the mirror? Maybe he was so desperate for friendship that he threw caution into the wind? We can only speculate about his inner motives that drove him up that tree to see Jesus.

Jesus noticed. Perhaps, it was the way Zacchaeus was dressed, someone who was used to wearing the finer clothes. Perhaps, it was seeing a wealthy grown man in a tree—an odd sight, to be sure. Perhaps, it was the crowd's look of disdain, it's murmuring. Whatever it was, Jesus noticed and invited himself over to Zacchaeus' house. By doing so, welcomed him back into the community. Jesus had a way of recognizing those on the fringes, on the edges, the outsiders, those deemed unsavable by those considered insiders, and bringing them back into the community, pulling people from the fringes and giving them a new place, a new identity. And this simple act turned Zacchaeus' life around!

We don't know how the conversation went. All we know is near the end of it, Zacchaeus wanted to show the community that he had changed by saying that half of his possessions he would give to the poor, and if he had defrauded anyone, he would repay back four times as much. To which Jesus responded, "*salvation has come to this house.*"

I want to probe a bit further Zaachaeus' motivation to see Jesus, because there are ideas which I hope will help us better understand our theme of being reconciled with ourselves.

I am suggesting Zacchaeus had a motivation to see Jesus that was beyond simple curiosity. Listening to and acting on this motivation brought restoration and new life to him. Since we were born, we have been socialized by our parents, families, and community to see ourselves and others in certain ways. Years ago, boys were socialized to do the farm work, the construction jobs, the men's work, while girls were socialized to remain indoors and do the cooking and cleaning, the women's work. Of course, these cultural rules and roles have changed and continue to change today. Socializations shapes our motives.

Personal experiences also impacts our motives. When I lived in China, one of my jobs for MCC Asia was recruiting, interviewing, and sending young adults on the International Volunteer Exchange Programme (IVEP) to either Canada and the US. One time my female colleague and I interviewed one young woman who told us how she had been abused by her father when she was a child, but had been healed when she became a Christian. Over the course of the interview, I could easily see that this young woman still had a long way to go to heal from the pain and horror of being abused as a child, as she couldn't even look or talk to me. When she spoke, she only looked at my female colleague.

So, we had to ask, if this young woman found it impossible to speak to me, a man, in her home culture, how would she respond when she was under pressure in a completely new one? How would these deep inner motives impact her relationships with her workplace and homestay? In the end, we decided not to accept her into the programme, and encouraged her to seek counselling so she could continue to heal.

When things happen how do you respond? Maybe there are those of us for whom everything has gone fairly well, life has unfolded as prescribed. Maybe, some of us are a little arrogant...we pray to God and then look over and see what somebody else is doing, and say, well thank God I'm not like that sinner. Or maybe you're the one for whom something terrible took place in your past and you're living constantly as a victim. And you can't break free from that story. And you live in that pain and hold that pain and are trapped in that pain until it becomes who you are. It controls your life. Maybe we're somewhere in between of that. I would assume that there's a wide spectrum in this room. Sometimes our motivations lead us further from God; sometimes they lead us closer to God. What inner motivations impact your life?

These inner motivations, these life tapes—we all have them, and we play them over and over to ourselves. Zacchaeus had some. So, did the crowd. These tapes play a major role in how we live our lives. For example, when I was in grade 3, I had a teacher who took some pleasure in humiliating me again and again in front of the entire class. And

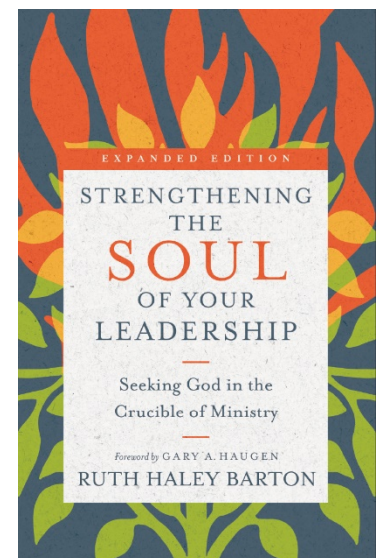
the message he gave me was that you are so dumb that you will never amount to much. Well, that was one of those experiences, one of those life tapes that impacted me for years. Now when I look at my report cards, I clearly see a pattern of assignments and projects started but left unfinished. The tape that played in my mind was, why should you try? You're just going to fail. You're never going to amount to much. That tape started playing in my grade three year.

Maybe someone said to you, you know you're never going to be as good as your brother or sister. Or you can't sing. What are the tapes that play in your life, the tapes in your mind that motivate you to act, to keep you going, to keep your world together? **Often, it's these tapes block us from the possibility of being reconciled with ourselves.**

God's intention at creation was to see ourselves as being made in the image of God. For our purposes this morning, being in the image of God is what motivates us to act and live in the world, not these life tapes that we constantly play again and again to ourselves. Growing into the image of God is not a one-time event but one that takes a lifetime of work, practice, reflection, and prayer to understand. And that is good! We have time to understand and God gives us that time. Jesus constantly gives us that time to understand what it means to be in the image of God.

Here are two brief suggestions of how to grow into the image of God.

1. It's a daily renewing of our minds. When you look daily in the mirror, invite God to give you greater clarity to what being in God's image means and how it will inform and shape your day. As Roman 12 says: be transformed by the renewing of our minds so we may discern what is the will of God what is good and acceptable and perfect.
2. Growing into God's image also means staying involved with our soul. As Ruth Haley Barton says in her book, *Strengthening the Soul of your Leadership* (and I'm going to change one word from leadership to life), is our "spiritual life emerges from our willingness to stay involved with our own soul—that place where God's spirit is at work stirring up our deepest motivations, questions, and longings in order to draw us deeper into a relationship with God. This isn't narcissistic naval gazing but rather a kind of attentiveness that helps us move on towards an ever-deepening relationship with God, and being able to say yes to God's call on our life.



There are always events that take place. There are always things that happen. What inner motivations, what tapes do we play over and over again that shapes our responses? **Reconciliation with ourselves requires us to know what they are, and deal with them so that reconciliation can take place with ourselves.** Thanks be to God who doesn't give up on us, but finds us even up in a tree, and welcomes us home! Amen