

BELPRES CHURCH

Sermon Title: The Best Story

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Scripture:

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short he could not see over the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree to see him, since Jesus was coming that way.

⁵ When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶ So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly.

⁷ All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."

⁸ But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount."

⁹ Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰ For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Transcript:

Well, hello, those of you online, thank you for joining us. And those of you in the room who made it through the snow, well done you owners of four wheel drive vehicles. Thank you for being here. There's more of you than I actually thought in the room, which is awesome. The sermon, the text is Luke chapter 19, a familiar story if you grew up in the church.

"Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short, he couldn't see over the crowd. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree to see him since Jesus was coming that way. When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.' So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner.' But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, 'Look, Lord, here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount.' And Jesus said to him, 'Today, salvation has come to this house because this man too is the son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost'."

So we've been doing a sermon series called Storytellers, about people in the Bible who have their lives changed by Jesus and they start telling their stories to other people. It's important to tell our stories because three things happen of how Jesus changed our life, because three things happen when we do. First, it makes those stories and Jesus more real to us. Second, it encourages other people that Jesus can change their lives too. And third, it makes Jesus look good to people who don't know him. Some of you may have thought, "Well, I don't know to tell my stories of how Jesus changed me. I'm not a good storyteller. I'm not good with words." You don't have to be, because the most powerful story there is has nothing to do with how eloquent we are. The most powerful story is a changed life. A changed life is walking proof that Jesus is real.

In this series, I've told you stories of people who've encountered Jesus. Grace and Jesus love and Jesus mercy and all of those things are very real, but there are also people who decide to follow Jesus not because of His grace and His mercy, but because Jesus gives them a swift kick in their blessed assurance and says, "I made you for more. You can do better. You can be better. I can help." As you've heard me say before, Jesus loves you just as you are and not as you should be. But He also loves you enough not to leave you the way He found you.

Recently, a couple of weeks ago, a friend of mine started to challenge me on some ways that I wasn't being as good a leader as he thought I could be. And so he said, "I think you can do better than this, Scott. I've seen it in you. I think you have it in you to be a better leader than you're being right now. So be that leader." I was not insulted. I did not feel hurt. That felt like a vote of confidence. That felt like what he said, "Hey, it's in you. Be that." That felt like love. That felt like encouragement and a vote of confidence.

Jesus loves you just as you are and not as you should be, but he also loves you enough to change you. A change life is the most eloquent story there is, and that's what's going on in this text I read about Zacchaeus. Jesus calls him out on his sin and calls him up to be the man that God created him to be. Zacchaeus, the text says was a tax collector, but not the way we think of that word.

So see, the Israel had been conquered by the Romans and Rome was extracting all of the wealth out of the country. Tax collectors were Jewish collaborators who overcharged their fellow Jews way more than the already very high Roman rates of taxation and they pocketed the difference and they got very rich doing it. So this isn't so much a tax, it's a shakedown. This is mafia stuff. This is, "Give me 80% of your wealth or I'll ruin you. I'll destroy you."

People lost their life savings. People were not able to feed their families because of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus got very rich doing this to people. Not to mention the fact that he's participating in the corporate sin of the Romans oppressive regime. But I am sure, I am sure like all of us because we all do this, I'm sure like all of us, Zacchaeus had his narratives that justified his actions because we all have narratives that justify our actions, right? I'm sure. Things like, "Well, you know what? Someone's got to collect the taxes, so it might as well be me because I'm going to be nicer than the guy down the street." Or maybe he thought, "Well, you know what? The Romans have given us some good things. The aqueduct, that's a good thing. Aqueducts, they don't grow on trees, they cost money. So I collect the taxes to build the aqueducts. I am not oppressing people. I'm bringing them clean water."

We all have our narratives that justify our sinful behaviors that hurt other people. And we all have a sin problem. All of us. For Christmas, someone gave my wife a box, a tin of shortbread. I love shortbread. But she was saving it for her book club, but she said, "You can have some of it." So I had some of it. Half. That's some, right? She didn't specify how much of some. I took half. When she found out, she just looked at me and she said, "You have a problem." I do. I do have a problem. We all have a problem. We all have a sin problem. And Jesus calls us out of it and calls us up to be who he created us to be. And that's what's going on in this story.

When I say calls us up and calls us out, I do not mean Jesus calls us to work harder, try more at sin management. It's not about working harder to be good or to be nice. Jesus doesn't want to make you nice. He wants to make you new. Writer C.S. Lewis says, "It's not teaching a horse to jump better, it's turning a horse into a winged creature." It's a complete transformation, that's what Jesus wants to do.

Someone sent me a story about a man who went home with a friend of his for dinner and he noticed that his friend really treated his wife really well, kissed her, complimented her, all this stuff. This man didn't do things like that for his wife, but he was inspired by that. So when he went home, he brought his wife flowers, he kissed her. He said, "I am so lucky to be married to you." And she burst into tears. And he said, "What?" And she said, "It's been a terrible day. Billy got in the fight, the refrigerator broke and now you come home drunk." She didn't recognize him because he'd been transformed. Jesus is going to transform Zacchaeus completely to be the man that God created him to be.

The text says, "He wanted to see who Jesus was, but because he was short, he could not see over the crowd so he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore fig tree to see him." So Zacchaeus has probably heard about Jesus and he's intellectually curious about Jesus. He's not having a life crisis. He hasn't hit rock bottom. I mean everyone hates him, but he's rich and he's powerful. He's not desperate, but he's intellectually curious. And it says, "When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.' So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly." In that culture, to go into someone's home was the highest form of social acceptance and respect that you could show someone.

Now, Jesus is not condoning Zacchaeus' sin. He's going to call him out of that sin, but it's going to feel like love. Just that Jesus noticed to Zacchaeus, let alone wants to go to his house and show him that kind of acceptance, that alone, just noticing him felt like love. And that he called him by name would've felt like love to Zacchaeus. Commentators are always like, "How did Jesus know his name because he just got to town?" Mostly they say, "Well, Jesus is God in the flesh so He just knew Zacchaeus name," except that the Bible's pretty clear. While Jesus was on earth, he laid aside his omniscience and his omnipotence. So I've got another suggestion for how Jesus knew his name. He asked. He cared enough about Zacchaeus to ask someone, "Hey, short guy up there in the tree, what's his name?" And that would've felt like love.

I probably wouldn't even notice Zacchaeus up in that tree. I've been looking for the mayor or someone like that, right? But Jesus notices him. Jesus calls him by name and that feels like love. Notice what Jesus does not say. He does not say, "Zacchaeus, you wicked greedy, tax collector. You clean up your life. Get down here. You clean up your life and then I'll go to your house." No, he just says, "I'm going to go to your house, Zacchaeus." A sign of respect and acceptance in that culture. That is not what the crowd wanted Jesus to say to Zacchaeus. That is not what the crowd wanted Jesus to say at all. So it says, "All the people saw this and began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner'."

Now, if you didn't know the story, at this point the crowd's muttering, if you didn't know the story, what would you think Zacchaeus would do next? Well, not this. "Zacchaeus stood up and said, 'Look, Lord. Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor. And if I've cheated anybody out anything, I'll pay back four times that amount.'" The religious law of the time said to give 10% of your income to God's work. Zacchaeus is going to give half. The law said that if you cheated someone, pay back 120%. Zacchaeus is going to pay back 400%. This isn't just generous. This is a complete and utter radical turnaround from the greedy tax collector he was just minutes before.

So what happened? What changed him? Why did he become this transformed person? Two things. First, the cross. Even though it hasn't chronologically happened yet, it's happening in this story. Look at the verse again. "The people began to mutter, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner'." Who are they mad at? Not Zacchaeus. They're mad at Jesus for going to Zacchaeus'

house. Jesus drew the hostility of the crowd away from Zacchaeus and onto Himself in the same way that on the cross Jesus draws the punishment that we deserve for our sins on Himself so that we don't have to experience that. But when Jesus encounters that kind of radical love that would die for him, not in his head, but in his heart, when it's a lived experience, it transforms him, it changes him.

And then the second reason I think Zacchaeus has changed is because Jesus rightly named him, called him by name. And in that culture, a name wasn't just a label, a name was thought to sum up your character, your essence. In that culture, your name was who you are. And Jesus calls him by name, who he really is before sin wrecked him, before greed took over his life, before a thousand justifications that he told himself to ease his moral conscience. Before all of that happened, Jesus calls him for who he really is, for who God created him to be. Because you see, the name Zacchaeus means innocent and pure. Innocent and pure, which does not describe Zacchaeus, the greedy tax collector, but it does describe the Zacchaeus God created him to be. I think in this moment, Zacchaeus felt what I felt when my friend said, "Hey, I think you have in it to be a better leader dead." I think he felt loved, seen, and inspired to be called up to be the man that God created him to be. When Zacchaeus experiences Jesus love that died for him and hears Jesus tell him who he really is before sin wrecked him, he's transformed. And now his changed life becomes the story that he tells that everybody can see. We have not truly encountered the real grace of Jesus if it does not change us.

In my life, I have been part of three wonderful churches and one truly terrible church. The truly terrible church I've told you about before, it was when I was in seminary. We had to work in churches in seminary. We had to work in churches and it was called field education or Field Ed for short, but I called it field dead because that was this church. Everyone in this church, they were just so mean, especially this one guy named Frank.

Frank was always mean. Frank was mad about everything. Frank was always mad about the music. Frank was mad at all the different... He didn't like the people who were going to the church. He yelled at me on several occasions. One time he yelled at me because I used the word stuff in a sermon and he was just incensed. He said, "How dare you use such a casual word like stuff in church? How dare you do that?" And I'm just thinking, "Man, Frank, you got issues. You need to go work on your stuff."

I remember there was this one congregational meeting where they were arguing over how much money they should spend to help people in poverty. And Frank said, "We shouldn't spend any money on that. We should spend our money on our 200-year old building and keep it beautiful. That's what matters." And then from the back of the room, this elderly woman said, "Oh, put a cork in it, Frank. We don't do anything for anybody because of you, but we should." But the thing that was the most sad about Frank was that nobody was shocked that he hadn't changed. No emergency meeting of the elders was called to deal with this strange and rare case of the man who had gone to church his entire life and had never been changed by it.

See, when we really experience the grace of Jesus, not in our heads, but in our hearts, it really transforms us. And if we haven't been changed, then we haven't really experienced the depth of Jesus' love and grace for us. Our changed lives then become the most eloquent stories that we can tell. It's not about trying harder, it's not about doing better sin management, it's about encountering Jesus so deeply that it changes us.

So then how do we do that? How do we have that kind of encounter with Jesus that it changes us? Well, four action steps for this week. I know I usually give you like two. Four this week, so extra bonus points. Four. And the first three, I'm going to borrow from Pastor Tim Keller because I like the phrases he used. So I'm going to use his phrases, but I'll give it different content.

To experience a deeper life-changing relationship with Jesus, climb a tree, get over the crowd and take Jesus home with you. Climb a tree. Zacchaeus climbed a tree. Now think about that for a minute. If a wealthy, powerful person, say wearing a business suit, climbed a tree to see a parade, that would look kind of silly, right? When Zacchaeus climbed that tree, he was willing to lay aside his image management, willing to look maybe a little bit silly, willing to look a little undignified just to get to Jesus.

So in order to experience Jesus more deeply, we have to let go of our image management and trying to look like we have it all together all of the time. And that's hard for us. For instance, in this church, frequently people will say, "I don't want to go receive prayer after the service" even though the only thing they may be doing is asking for a prayer of thanksgiving for something that they're grateful for, but they say, "I don't want to go get prayer because someone might see me and think I have a problem." We know you have a problem. Several as a matter of fact. Don't let your false sense of dignity, your image management, get in the way of a deeper experience of Jesus. Be willing to get prayer. Be willing to let go and experience emotions in worship. Let go of the desire to look perfect and let people and Jesus into the messy, broken, ugly parts of your life so that he can heal them.

I do not know anyone who has a deep relationship with Jesus who isn't changed by it. But I do know a lot of people who go to church that are so into their image management, they don't actually encounter Jesus at an emotional level. And those people are never changed. And in fact, often they just get meaner and meaner and meaner, which is why churches have some mean people. Climb a tree. Let go of image management to experience Jesus more deeply. Second, get over the crowd. What keeps Zacchaeus from seeing Jesus is the crowd. And a nasty, mean, judgmental crowd they are, aren't they? That often keeps people away from Jesus. Now, yes, there is such a thing as sin. And yes, Jesus calls sinners to repentance. But let's analyze that sentence. Who calls sinners to repentance? Me? You? Jesus calls sinners to repentance.

The crowd had told Zacchaeus about his sin every day of his life. Did it change him? Nope. What changed him was that radical encounter with Jesus. Our job is to lead people to Jesus and let Jesus call them to repentance. Jesus told His disciples that they would be fishers of people. What that means is we catch them, Jesus cleans them. Okay? Got it?

To experience Jesus, we have to get past the version of Jesus the crowd presents to us, which sometimes is the harsh mean Jesus. But then sometimes the crowd presents us the wimpy Jesus, the no power Jesus, the no victory Jesus, the no overcoming Jesus, the Jesus that always approves of every single thing we ever do Jesus. The media gives us images of Jesus. Zacchaeus didn't try to see Jesus through the crowd. He went over the crowd to see who Jesus really was. The best way to do that is to read the New Testament, to see who Jesus really is and pray and listen for those thoughts that come from Him, that are of Jesus' voice, the thoughts that maybe aren't our thoughts. Climb a tree. Get over the crowd. Take Jesus home with you.

In verse 5, Jesus says to Zacchaeus, "I must stay at your house today." Not just have dinner. Stay. And verse 7 says, "The crowd uttered, 'He has gone to be the guest of a sinner'." In the original Greek in which this was written, those verses mean both room and board. So Jesus didn't just go have dinner with Zacchaeus. Jesus went to live with Zacchaeus for a while. And Jesus is saying, "If you really want me to change your life, if you really want to be transformed, you will not just meet with me one hour on a Sunday. You will let me into every part of your life, how you deal with setbacks at school, how you handle your friendships, how you raise your kids, how you use money, sex and power. Let my Holy Spirit guide you in every moment of your life."

Climb a tree. Get over the crowd. Take Jesus home with you. And notice, none of those things are a three-step moral self-improvement program. None of those things are about you trying harder to be a good person. Jesus didn't tell anyone to try harder to be a good person. He never changed anyone's life with a three-step plan to try harder and be a good person. He changed their lives by going to their homes and living life with them. It's about relationship.

And then fourth action step, baptism or reaffirmation of baptism next Sunday as a way of telling our stories that Jesus is doing something in our lives, which makes Jesus more real to us and encourages other people. We have a lot of people signed up. It's going to be super cool. We got a lot of people signed up, but there's still plenty of room for you. You can sign up for this at the welcome desk after the service. Or if you're online, you can do so right now in the chat. And by the way, if you're a little hesitant to do this because you're a little uncomfortable with people seeing you up front getting baptized, go back to action step number one about letting go of image management and then you just talk to Jesus about that. Be here next week because I think it's going to be super cool. It's going to be really cool.

I know a man that said for almost all of his life, his dad was a cantankerous, grumpy man. Sometimes he used stronger language, but just a mean man. And my friend said, "My dad

would always yell at my mom. My dad would always yell at me. He was obsessed with money and his career. I never once heard him say he loved me or that he was proud of me." But people kept praying for him. His son kept praying for him. The men in his son's Bible study kept praying for him for decades. Eventually, this grumpy man ended up in an assisted living facility, which he hated, but there were some people there who made friends with him and would tell their stories about how Jesus had changed their lives.

And then eventually they invited him to read the Bible with them and the Bible with them. What Mr. Cantankerous found on almost every page of scripture was a God who loved him just as he was, not as he should be, but also loved him enough not to leave him the way he found him. And that love that loved him, even though he'd been mean his whole life, he was overwhelmed by that, but also he was excited and felt challenged in a really cool way that this God could make him a new person, could make him a different person. He knew that he couldn't become that new person on his own, so eventually he made Jesus his leader and his forgiver.

And then gradually over the course of a couple of years, the results were staggering. Mr. Cantankerous turned into Mr. Joy and he started saying things like, "I can't wait to meet Jesus face to face when I die." Instead of yelling at the staff at the assisted living facility, he'd ask them how their day was going and how could he pray for them. Instead of hoarding all of his money, he started giving some of it away. And then one day after a year or so of this, his son was visiting him and was saying goodbye and then this man said to him, "Son, I want you to know I love you and I'm proud of you." And the son said, "Dad, I love you too." This son had never heard his dad say those words in his entire life. Never heard his dad say, "I love you and I'm proud of you." But that moment changed the relationship forever.

Jesus called this man out on his sin, called him up to be the person God created him to be. This man wasn't an eloquent speaker. He didn't have to be, because everyone could see, the staff of the facility knew, his family knew, his friends knew. They could see that Jesus was at work because his changed life was the story that he told.

So where is Jesus calling you out and where is he calling you up? Not do more, work harder, try harder sin management. Genuine real from the heart transformation. Climb a tree. Get over the crowd. Take Jesus home with you. Maybe get baptized or reaffirm your baptism next Sunday so that the whole world will know that Jesus is Lord because of how he lives in you. And you, your change, life becomes the story everyone can see.

Jesus, only you can do it. Only you can do it. Rules can't do it. Lectures can't do it. But Jesus, we know you, relationship with you can do it. So Lord, help us take you home with us today and live every moment of our lives with you so that we become the people you created us to be and tell a story of your goodness to everyone around. In your name Jesus. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

Read this week's scripture(s) & answer the below questions with your friends, family, or All In small group.

Icebreaker Question: Do you have any pets? If not, what is a pet you always wished you could have?

Opening Question: Looking back to last week's sermon and scripture... How did you live differently or practice what we talked about in your life this week? What did you do and how did it go?

Scripture Reflection Questions: Read this week's scripture together and discuss the following:

- What do we learn about God (e.g., traits, personality, what matters, priorities) in this passage?
- What do we learn about people, and ourselves in particular, this week?

Sermon Reflection Questions: Reflecting on this week's sermon, discuss the following:

- What motivated Zacchaeus to make restitution to those he'd cheated?
- To get closer to Jesus and experience more life change do you need to
 - a. Be willing to sacrifice some of your false dignity ("climb a tree")?
 - b. See Jesus for who he really is not through the lens of other people ("get over the crowd")?
 - c. Make Jesus more integral to every part of your life ("take Jesus home with you")?

Closing Question and Application: Given what we've discussed together today, how might God want you to apply these learnings to your life or in the life of your community this next week? Who might you share this with?

Closing group prayer: Spend a few minutes together in your group sharing prayer requests and then praying together for each other. Thank God for the time together, the conversation shared, the other people in the group, and for encouragement in the week ahead.