

Seeing Possibility
Luke 19:1-10
First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
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Les Brown grew up in Miami, Florida with his twin brother. By the end of elementary school he had been held back and shifted into special education classes, getting dubbed “the dumb twin” by his peers. The labels put on him began to shape his identity, both as he saw himself and as others perceived him. It wasn’t until a teacher was unwilling to accept this understanding that Les saw another possibility. One day, after his class laughed at him for refusing to believe he could solve a problem that had been asked of him, that teacher said, “Someone else’s opinion of you does not have to become your reality” (<https://wabisabilearning.com/blogs/mindfulness-wellbeing/4-stories-great-teachers>). This perspective stuck with him and Les went from being a struggling student to a state representative in Ohio to a motivational speaker.

What happens when someone is willing to see the possibility in another person? That question can just as easily be answered by looking at today’s story.

Here is Zacchaeus. But who was he?

He was a tax collector. And it is important to understand that even though most of us live in a love/hate relationship with taxes, both understanding the good they do for our communities *and* wishing we didn’t have to pay them, a tax collector in Jesus’ day was different than what we would experience. Tax collectors like Zacchaeus were Jewish people who worked on behalf of the Roman empire - and simply because of that, they were considered to be traitors. They were hated for working with Rome. Additionally, the chief tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, paid their contracts in advance, so they were people of means. This meant they didn’t get a lot of sympathy from others and weren’t thought to have any understanding of those who were living payday to payday just trying to get by. Tax collectors made their money by charging more than what was owed to the government and so, were assumed to be dishonest (*New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol IX, 356-57*).

So, what all this means for Zacchaeus is that on this day when Jesus was passing through town, it was unlikely that anyone would have sympathy for him as he stood, shorter than the average man of his day, trying to catch a glimpse. It likely meant that as he ran to find a way to see Jesus and as he climbed the tree, acts considered undignified in his culture, people either simply didn’t notice him or if they did, they likely laughed and mocked him.

But something sent Zacchaeus scurrying up that tree. Something drew him to Jesus.

And even with crowds of people vying for Jesus’ attention, it was the man, likely hidden in the tree, who he spoke to.

Because Jesus was able to see the possibility beyond the external facade, beyond the role and expectations, beyond the hatred and accusations. Jesus was able to see not only who the systems said Zacchaeus was, but who he could become.

And when Jesus spoke his name...when Jesus said, “hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5b, NRSV)...in that moment it was as if Jesus held up a mirror for Zacchaeus to look in and see the possibility, too.

But, let’s be honest. Becoming the best of who he could be was not easy. And sometimes we forget that. We were raised singing, “Zacchaeus was a wee little man...” We know he climbed the tree and we know that when Jesus spoke, he came down. But we forget that encountering Jesus wasn’t just about taking him home and feeding him dinner. Rather, the impact of being seen by Jesus was one that changed Zacchaeus’ life.

And it changed it in real ways. Ways that impacted himself and his lifestyle - after all, you don’t give away half of your possessions and not feel an impact. It also made a difference for others as they both watched him transform *and* as they experienced the reparations that he offered. All because Jesus called on him.

So we are reminded, as the writer at [preacherrhetorica.com](https://www.preacherrhetorica.com) says, “the calling on calls for a response. How hard it was for Zacchaeus to go up that tree; but it takes even more courage to come down” (<https://www.preacherrhetorica.com/proper-26c-4th-bf-advent.html>).

And, again, we often forget that. We forget that being in the presence of Jesus isn’t just a feel good thing, but is a transforming encounter. We forget that to allow someone to see all of us - our sins and our strengths - is to be vulnerable to them. We forget that being seen for who we have been, who we are, and who we might possibly become also invites us to work to be our best. We forget that being vulnerable and inviting others to do the same is an act of courage.

So, what does Jesus see when he looks at us?

What are the strengths and possibilities, perhaps that live well at the surface or that are hidden deep within us?

What are the sins from which he calls us?

What are the systems out of which his gaze might help extricate us?

What are the changes that would happen in our lives if we stood, vulnerable before him, and looked in the mirror he held in front of us?

And how would others be impacted by these changes?

What would shift in us that would bring about fuller life for others?

And if we knew the experience of being seen - not on the surface, not for our worst mistakes - but truly being seen, how would that alter our encounters with others? How would that help us see the possibility in others?

It was easy for those around him to dismiss Zacchaeus as a tax collector - to assume that one piece of his identity was all they needed to know. Similarly, we respond the same way to many around us. We decide about people based on one encounter, one characteristic, one stereotype, one moment.

And yet, the Jesus who called Zacchaeus out of the tree, calls to us as well. He calls to us and sees the fullness of who we are. And he invites us to see the fullness in others as well.

I wonder...I wonder what our world might look like if we could all embrace the possibility.

Amen.