

Short in Stature, Long in Faith by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 22041031
Psalm 119: 137-144 and Luke 19:1-10
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Money is such a sensitive subject. Have you noticed how private we usually are about salaries? How irritated we get when we receive another request for a donation? How perturbed we are when it is time to pay taxes? Parting with our money is like parting with our left arm. It is as if our money were part of us!

That is exactly the point Jesus made time and time again. Our money is a part of us. What we do with our money and with our possessions is a reflection of our religion. Our relationship with God is closely tied to our relationship with money. When we compare what Jesus gave to what we give, we come up short.

The church is different from other organizations. It is not asking for a donation. It is providing us the opportunity to come face to face with Jesus Christ. Our gift to the church is a chance to search our own souls and ask, "How is it that I have what I have? How did I get this position in life? In what ways do my gifts and possessions proclaim to the world the fact that God is love?"

We can compare ourselves with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector of Jericho, and he was rich. He heard Jesus was coming through town, and he wanted to see who Jesus was. Zacchaeus was "small of stature," the story says, so he could not see Jesus because of the crowd. He was resourceful and eager, and so he climbed a sycamore tree. You ask, "How am I like Zacchaeus? Zacchaeus was a tax collector. I'm not a tax collector." We may not be tax collectors, but perhaps there are times we feel estranged or unpopular as tax collectors in Jesus' day were.

You say, "Zacchaeus was 'rich,' and I don't feel rich." It depends upon to whom we're comparing ourselves. If we compare ourselves to some residents of our area, we may come up poor, yes. But, if we compare ourselves to the majority of residents in the state of North Carolina, we find ourselves pretty rich. When we compare ourselves with the population of the world, we find ourselves very rich, and very fortunate.

The Story says Zacchaeus could not see Jesus because of the crowd. Does the crowd around us obscure our view of Christ? I think of all the competing organizations and activities making demands upon our time. Our busy worlds of jobs, children's activities, school functions, entertainment, and activities in retirement all obscure our vision of Christ. Perhaps our circle of friends obscures our vision. The values of our society, altruistic as they may be, still do not reflect the values of the Christian faith. The crowd obscures our view of Jesus.

Like Zacchaeus, we think we are small. We imagine ourselves powerless when it comes to the laws of the land, or world problems like peace, or hunger. Who am I? I'm just one person! How can I get terrorists to stop terrorizing? How can I reduce the warring, starving and suffering in the Sudan? Even in our own community, with domestic abuse on the rise, I feel as though I'm powerless to change the situation.

People in Jesus' day said Zacchaeus was a sinner, and wondered why Jesus would go to his house for lunch. In fact, they grumbled because Jesus was going to his house. We must recognize that we, too, are sinners because in our own ways we fall short of the mark Jesus has set for us in our relationship with God. We are sinners because there are times when we deny God loves us, or that God loves all creatures. We are sinners because accidentally we forget from time to time who God is and what God's relationship with us is.

Zacchaeus was a sinner because his relationship with God was not complete. But, Zacchaeus was curious! That is the first step in encountering Christ: Be curious— to want to see what Jesus looks like. Who was this man who wandered around the countryside with a crowd of men and women, healing and telling people that God loved them? Who was this man who allowed himself to be nailed to a

cross so we could have a richer, fuller life and be in closer relationship with God? Who was this person who taught us to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies? Curiosity is the first step to coming face to face with Christ.

Second, following Zacchaeus' example, we must rise above the crowd which obscures our vision of Christ. We hear so much "peer pressure": conforming to the standards of the crowd. Just because it seems as though everyone else is into a particular activity, or talking in a certain way, does that make it right? Just because everyone talks about football, does that make it so important? Just because others tell ethnic jokes, does that make ethnic jokes morally right? The demands and ways of Jesus Christ are not popular with the crowd. If we are going to encounter Christ, we must rise above the crowd. We do that by climbing our own sycamore tree.

Our sycamore tree, elevating us above the crowd and giving us a better perspective of the savior might consist of careful and persistent Bible-reading and church attendance where all are nurtured, and challenged, and encouraged to grow far above the crowds in moral attitudes and in loving and unconditional acceptance of others. Ironically, we rise above the crowds by serving the crowds.

Once we have responded to curiosity and climbed the tree, then we are ready for step four, to hear the call of Jesus to come down. Jesus does call to us, but often there is too much other noise around us to hear. Jesus looks right at you and me and says, "come down from your tree. Join me here on the ground, in front of the whole crowd." He says, "I want you to take me into your life: into your home and with you to your job. I want to eat with you, and play with you, and work with you, and laugh and cry with you."

Zacchaeus could have stayed up there in the tree. "Are you kidding, Jesus? I'm afraid. I just wanted to see what you look like. I didn't want any closer relationship than that. I was just curious." Zacchaeus is like the person who slips quietly into the back row of the church, near the door where it's easy to get out. He is here just to observe. Shinnyng down our tree is an act of faith and is step five in encountering Christ.

Step six, following Zacchaeus' lead, is to actually take Jesus into our lives, into our homes, our jobs, and so forth. In every encounter with another person ask yourself, "how would Jesus react? What would he say to this person who is hungry, or that one who is lonely? How would Jesus handle the guy who has embezzled funds, or that gal who has lied time and again? How would Jesus listen to the couple who has been arguing over money and child discipline?" Jesus in your life will be a constant reminder that, no matter how bad things get, God loves you and cares for you. Step seven is next, and here we get back to money, because most everything Jesus did or said had to do with money. Zacchaeus made a graphic, measurable response to his new relationship with Jesus. He gave half of his goods to the poor and said, "If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." His faith hit his pocketbook in a way that was a positive example of what our human relationships in response to the gospel should be: relationships of equality, of aiding those in need, and of honesty and activity.

In reaction to this graphic and tangible display of faith, Jesus said, "Today, salvation has come to this house. . . for the son of Man came to seek and save the lost."

We are bigger than we think we are. We can do more than we think to proclaim the gospel and reflect the kingdom of God on earth. Right here, we can change and affect lives for the better. We can demonstrate God's love for the world through what we do as church. But, it takes a positive graphic response to the call of Jesus in order to do it. Shinny down your tree. Your life can be changed: the world can be changed if you respond to Jesus' call.