

No Second Hand God, by Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. 23071104
Psalm 119:137-144 and Luke 19:1-10
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Children love Zacchaeus because he was a small man. They can identify with him. They love to climb trees, and he climbed a tree. They love to shout, “Zacchaeus, you come down!” Zacchaeus, the man who climbed the sycamore tree to see Jesus, is a man who struggled to deepen his faith. Let’s look a little more closely and see if he can help us in our faith.

Zacchaeus was a small man, small in stature, and probably small in faith. He probably was raised as a good Jewish boy who knew the law and made the short journey to the temple in Jerusalem. He had religion because everyone has religion, whether they read the Bible or not, go to church or stay at home, or recite mantras or not. According to M. Scott Peck, religion is the way we look out at the world.¹ Religion is the system of formulations on which we base our assumptions about everything.

What are our basic formulations? Strive for success? Have a good time? Treat others the way we want to be treated? Do good to others? The world is a mean rotten place, and you’re lucky to get what you can? Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself? Get ahead? Get rich so you can be comfortable? By the way, did you know there are no luggage racks on hearses. You never see suitcases packed for the deceased. You can’t take your riches with you when you die.

Peck says we get our religion from the people around us, primarily our parents. You might imagine what Zacchaeus’ parents taught him about the world: “Be a success: get ahead. Get rich. Don’t rock the boat. Support the rulers in office.” Perhaps they didn’t teach Zacchaeus this religion in so many words. Perhaps they made sure he went to Sabbath school. Perhaps they read to him from the Torah each evening. But religion isn’t taught just in words. It’s taught by what parents do, the way they live their lives. Somehow, Zacchaeus learned about wealth and security from his parents. He knew one of the best ways to get rich was to be a tax collector. He was “in” with the ruling authorities. It did not matter to him that the people around him, the farmers and traders didn’t like him so much. He overcharged the normal tax rate so he could support himself. He was doing well for himself. By worldly standards he was a success.

Like Zacchaeus, we get religion from our parents, not so much by what they say, because they tell us good things: “Be kind, obey, and clean up your room.” We get religion more from what our parents do and what they are. They may tell us to be kind, but we might have felt the welts from their beatings. They may tell us to have faith in God, but their faith may be in military strength or the bank, or the stock market. They may tell us, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say anything at all, but perhaps we heard their belittling words.

The faith Zacchaeus received from his parents lasted for a while, but one day he made a big discovery. He had lots of money and he was well known in the community, but he had no satisfaction. He was not happy. Success, riches, and fame do not bring happiness. It was Liv Ullman who said in her autobiography, “The best thing that can come from success is the knowledge that it is not something to be longed for.”

Zacchaeus had heard of this man Jesus who had healed and taught people things like, “Turn the other cheek,” and “Sell what you have and give to the poor, and you’ll gain riches in heaven”

¹M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled* © 1978, Simon and Schuster

and “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” This Jesus was coming to his town.

Zacchaeus decided to close up his tax collecting shop and see Jesus. He was short, so he climbed up a sycamore tree. His life changed that day. He took Jesus to his home and his life was transformed. He returned four times what he had defrauded anyone. He gave up the religion of his parents as bankrupt. He no longer had a second-hand God. He experienced God for himself, personally, and first hand.

There comes a time when we have to rid ourselves of the religion that our parents and the culture around us has taught us. There is no such thing as a good hand-me-down religion. There is no second-hand God. The faith of our fathers or mothers is not good enough. Neither the minister, nor Robert Schuller, nor the Pope nor the President can give you faith. Reading the letters of Paul to the churches of Greece is like reading someone else’s mail. It might help, but it wasn’t directed to you. You must develop your own faith. Our religion must be forged, as Peck says, through the fire of our questioning and doubting in the crucible of our own experience of reality.

Second hand religion is like a broomstick horse. It looks like a horse. You play with it like a horse, but it isn’t a horse. You forget that you’re holding up the horse. The horse isn’t supporting you. You don’t have to hold up real faith. The real thing will support you.

How do you go about building a first-hand faith? In a way, you have to find a sycamore tree and climb it. The first step is profound curiosity: the willingness to question, challenge, and get closer to God. Instead of meekly accepting the pious platitude of another about the death of someone you loved, such as “God needed your mother more than you did,” be honest. Follow the example of Job or the Psalmist, or Jesus. Shake your fist at God and tell God you’re angry at your loss. Ask God in a loud voice, “Why?”

The second step is to join with a group of adults seeking to deepen their faith. Join a Bible study group that is critical in nature and which seeks to find meaning for today. Join a discussion group where the members are honest and challenge their own beliefs. As you hear new ideas, try them out in the light of reality.

Begin the day in quiet meditation: Commune with God. You might have your calendar in one hand and your Bible in the other. In what ways will God challenge you through your schedule? Where do you need God’s support and strength?

Throw out your old ideas and beliefs that don’t work anymore. Remember, Jesus went out of his way to accept sinners and outcasts. He accepted Zacchaeus. He scandalized the pious religious people through his actions. He didn’t follow accepted practices, but instead, practiced radical love. God accepts you and me.

After you’ve climbed your sycamore tree to get a closer look, come down out of it. Receive God joyfully into your life, the way Zacchaeus did. He was honored to have Jesus eat with him. We have the opportunity to invite Jesus to eat with us at this table. How will your life be transformed today because you’re not willing to have a second hand God?