

October 31, 2010 - Rev. Anne Hodges-Copple [PDF] (II Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10)

In the front yard of my childhood home was a very scrawny mimosa tree. Now, surely you've seen these trees, but you folk in North Carolina and on the East Coast you've grown up with much more glorious trees than the mild mannered scrawny mimosa. But for me in North Texas, this was a big deal tree. Loved that mimosa tree. And I loved to climb that tree. I think there were a variety of reasons why I loved to climb that tree, sometimes maybe just to get away from it all. Sometimes when you climb a tree, you can step back and you can see farther. You see from a different perspective than you've seen before. And it's also possible for you to see without necessarily being seen, although I have to tell you the leaves of a mimosa tree don't really hide all that much. But you'd be surprised how much people keep their eyes looking down.

You don't normally, however, think of rich, older people running and climbing trees, and I think it's their loss. But yet Zacchaeus one day decides to run and climb a tree, a sycamore tree. Now, admittedly I understand from notes, that in Israel the sycamore tree is a low, squat tree with the branches very low to the ground and kind of go out to the side and so maybe this was not quite as daunting as my mimosa tree. But Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector in Jericho, decides one day to climb a tree because like so many others in Jericho he hears that Jesus of Nazareth is coming through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem. Zacchaeus wants to see who Jesus is. And the scripture puts that so very interestingly. It's not just that Zacchaeus wants to be able to see Jesus, Zacchaeus wants to be able to see who Jesus is. And so he runs ahead, climbs a tree to get a better view because, you see, although Zacchaeus was a rich and wealthy man -- taking money as a tax collector does from the children of Israel and giving it to the Roman Empire -- Zacchaeus was short in stature and also short in respectability. He was despised by his community. He stood on the margins, not just of that crowd that day in Jericho, but stood on the margins of social acceptability. He was an outsider in his own family.

So Zacchaeus runs to get the best vantage point, a perspective on Jesus. But perhaps just as interestingly, perhaps more significantly, Jesus, out of all this throng that surrounds him, out of all the various people that he could go to or heal or look at, Jesus sees Zacchaeus. In fact, it's almost as if Zacchaeus is just the man Jesus is looking for. "Zacchaeus, come down out of that tree! I *must* have dinner at your house today." Or maybe he said it, "I must have dinner at *your* house today." Zacchaeus, a notorious sinner and outsider, is thrilled. He's thrilled! "Come, Jesus! Come to my house. Come immediately to my house." I'm thinking what is Mrs. Zacchaeus thinking? "Oh, no. No, no. I'm not ready." But it's not just that Jesus comes to Zacchaeus' house and that Zacchaeus welcomes him so warmly into his home. This encounter with Jesus completely changes Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus is transformed so much that he finds that all this wealth that he's amassed is actually nothing compared to what he has gained by Jesus coming into his home, by offering hospitality to Jesus. In fact, and such is his gratitude that he cannot give enough away in order to live this new life.

Okay, you think it's a stewardship sermon. It's not. Sorry, Babs. But it would have been a great one. Instead, this is about how strangely, how oddly, how often surprisingly God has a way of interrupting us and inviting us anew. He invites himself into our lives. Now, it's interesting

because the crowd is listening to all this. Jesus is apparently talking to Zacchaeus, right? No, he's not. He's talking to the crowd. The crowd are the ones who think they know who Jesus is, they deserve to be close to Jesus, they deserve to have Jesus come to their house. They're horrified that Jesus has gone to Zacchaeus' house. And yet when they go -- it's the custom of the Middle East that the crowd can go and stand on the perimeter of someone's house -- they go just as Jesus knew they would and watch the transformation, watch somebody who seemed the least deserving become the most intimate with Jesus.

Jesus is not just finding Zacchaeus who was lost, he's also finding the crowd who had lost their way in their religiosity, in their properness, in their higher than thou morality. Maybe some of us are Zacchaeus. We've lost our way. Oh, we might show up at church, but we may not feel worthy to be here. We might show up and go through the motions, but we're waiting, waiting, waiting to really hear and believe the invitation that we are worthy, that we are forgiven, that we are sought often, that we too can be found and find a place in the kingdom of heaven. And some of us are the crowd. We think we've done pretty much everything. The brass is polished, the music is gorgeous, the ties are straight, we are ready for Jesus. We're ready to meet Jesus in this house at this time of day, of week. Are we ready, though, to have Jesus into the intimacy of our lives? Are we ready to have Jesus into the homes, into our dwellings, into where we dwell with fears, concerns, burdens that we just don't know if we can share with anyone? Are we really willing to invite Jesus into our lives and into our homes?

What we strive for as a parish is to make people feel welcome. We want to make our parish home feel welcome. We're ready to reach out to the needs of others, to have them feel welcome. I wonder if we spend as much time looking at our own lives and asking where does God need to come in to closer residency with my own life? Where do I need to invite God in and say, "I'm in need of transformation"? Where is life just too much, too hard, too frightening or just too empty? Would Jesus come there? In one way or another, we are all lost and we're all found. And we find ourselves in a common place -- no one better, no one worse, all needing the Lord.

Next Sunday we have baptism. We'll be inviting two new infant babies into the household of God. We come to that part of the baptism, "We welcome you into the household of God!" Maybe we can spend some more time showing these young Christians as they grow up how we welcome God when we welcome others in to our parish home. How we meet God when we reach out to others in need. And above all, when we reach out to another in need, we're willing to show our need to another. Maybe part of the commonness we bring around this table is to say we all have needs and burdens, not just to share with God, but with one another. We are all lost, we are all found. We have limbs we need to crawl out on, taking a chance for the sake of the Gospel. But even more importantly, we have the tree of the cross. Jesus has gone up for us, Jesus went down for us and Jesus has risen for us. We can climb down from the trees that separate us from the crowd and enter into the Kingdom, for we once were lost and now are found. Amen.