

## Jesus and Zacchaeus

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost, November 5, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 119:137-144; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Zacchaeus wasn't a normal first century Jewish man. Little about him was normal. His occupation wasn't normal. He collected taxes for the hated Romans. His religion wasn't normal. Considered unclean by other Jews because of his business dealing with Romans, he was shunned. Classed with robbers. Not at all welcome in the synagogue. His income wasn't normal. He was enormously wealthy. His behavior wasn't normal - like climbing trees. Grown up Jewish men don't climb trees. It's not dignified. And even his height abnormal. He was a "wee little man". Zacchaeus wasn't normal. He didn't fit. He was the odd man out.

---

Now let's put Zacchaeus to one side and think about normal people. Not somebody like Zacchaeus. Somebody normal. Somebody with a normal job, normal income, normal behavior, a normal religion, physically normal. A presbyterian! At least that's what a lot of people think. A lot of people think we presbyterians are normal people. Boy are they wrong.

Imagine a normal presbyterian family. See them sitting together as a family during the worship service. Mr. and Mrs. Norman and Nora Normal and their two wonderful children, Nancy and Nick Normal. Norman and Nora hold hands all through the worship service the way normal married people do. Their clothing is normal. They dress nicely, but not too expensively. Nothing

outlandish. Everything matches. They look devout, but not too devout. They laugh. They smile.

Mr. and Mrs. Normal married at just the right age. They have normal physical builds. He's exactly six foot tall and well built. She's a slim five foot, seven inches. Both of them can eat without gaining weight. They drink moderately without becoming alcoholics. They both work, but they still find time for their children. They've been married twenty years. Never had a serious problem in their marriage. Mr. and Mrs. Normal are good citizens. They volunteer at church and in the community. They're politically moderate. You can be sure they'll vote on Tuesday.

Now look at their children. Two beautiful children. A boy and a girl. They're bright, well-behaved, good looking kids. Normal kids. They get along with one another. They pay attention during the worship service. Everybody envies the Normal children. Everybody envies the Normal family.

Only problem is - Mr. and Mrs. Normal don't exist. Never did! Never will! Yet, so many of us think everybody else is normal. And most of us go to great lengths to make other people think that we're perfectly normal people.

A lot of church members are miserable because they don't measure up to this mythical normal family. We feel like misfits when we come to church surrounded by all these people we think are normal. Too often church members live under the strain of thinking that they alone are odd and different. For example, a member of our church - a member who hasn't been to worship in

seven years - recently told another member, "I feel out of place at OPC." He thinks we're all normal. He knows he's not normal. The fact is - we're all abnormal. We don't measure up to the norms God has established.

The fact is a large proportion of an average congregation is unmarried. They're widowed. They're divorced. They're childless. They fight weight problems. They fight drinking problems. They have sexual problems. Some fight drug problems. Some of us wish we were taller. Some wish we were shorter. We have marital conflicts. We get deeply depressed. We worry about paying bills. We worry about our health. Most of us have children who don't get straight A's. Children who sometimes scream at one another and at their parents. Most of us have no ~~chance of conforming to the pattern of Mr. and Mrs. Normal and~~ their children. No matter how hard we try, we'll never, never be Mr. and Mrs. Normal.

Church members aren't the only people who feel they can't measure up to Mr. and Mrs. Normal. People outside the church feel that way even more. Why do so many people living around our church never dream of coming to worship? They think we presbyterians are normal. They think we think we're normal. They know they're not normal. I think of hundreds of people in Oxford without a church home. They have no church connection but they have the same needs we have. They share our hopes and worries. They need to know that God has come to us in Jesus.

Jesus said, "The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." Now, he said that in many different ways. For example,

he once said, "I have come to call not the righteous but sinners to repentance." You can put quotes around "righteous". Because the "righteous" are like the mythical normal family. They don't exist. Righteous people don't exist anymore than normal people.

God did not come to us in Christ to save normal people. People who live up to God's norms don't need to be saved. People who live up to God's norms don't get lost. The fact is - none of us live up to God's norms. None of us is normal. All of us are lost. Lost until we're found by Jesus.

The gospel is good news for people who aren't normal. Good news for lost people. The gospel is for broken people. Defective people. People who don't have normal lives.

Zacchaeus is a good example. Jesus finds Zacchaeus hiding ~~in a tree.~~ Jesus wants to bring him into the company, not of the normal, but of the crooked who are being straightened out. Look at Zacchaeus! He's probably in his forties. A grown man hiding in a tree. The crowd moves beneath him, struggling, pushing to get a glimpse of Jesus. Probably not much more in that crowd than average, normal curiosity. But the eyes of Jesus look up to the leafy branches of a single tree. Zacchaeus finds himself looking straight into the eyes of Son of God. Zacchaeus hears Jesus speak to him. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

We never really hear the gospel until we realize that this is how Christ meets us. The gospel is not some general message of goodwill to the world. The gospel comes to each of us at the point of our deepest need, where we're most conscious of our

lostness. In the preaching of the Gospel the Risen Christ seeks out each one of us. The Risen Christ knows all about the very things that make us feel abnormal, awkward and ashamed. When the gospel is truly preached, we hear, not just the voice of the preacher - we hear the Risen Christ saying to us, "I must stay at your house today." "I want to come into your life." "I want to get to know you better - know you as you really are." The gospel is for you and for me just when we most feel that we're not normal.

And what happens when we hear Jesus say to us, "I must stay at your house today"? Probably our first thought is: "Oh, my house is such a mess. It's so dirty. Let me go home first and clean it up. I don't want you see my house the way it is. I'd ~~be so embarrassed.~~" But Jesus doesn't care. He doesn't care if our house is a mess. He doesn't want us to wait until we get our house in order. He wants to come to our house just the way it is. He wants to stay there. He wants to clean it up.

Look at what happened to Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus into his house. And Zacchaeus started to change. He continued to be a "wee little man". Jesus certainly didn't work a miracle to make him six foot tall. Jesus is not a genie who grants all our wishes. But we begin to grow morally.

That's what happened to Zacchaeus. He gave half of all his possessions to the poor. He was a rich man. He very likely could give half of all he had away and still live very comfortably. But because Jesus was staying with him he began to have a concern for poor people that went far beyond the normal

concern most people have. And Zacchaeus said, "If I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." He became much more sensitive to the hurt he caused other people. He began to grow tall morally.

To the end of his life Zacchaeus never was quite normal. He continued to be a "wee little man". But he grew taller and taller morally. He knew that God loves people who aren't quite normal. He experienced the healing of God's grace. Jesus said, "Salvation has come to this house."

Salvation! It's a spiritual revolution with practical results that occur in the lives of us abnormal people when we drop the barriers and surrender to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.

Let us pray: Merciful God, righteous judge of all, you sent Jesus among us to seek and to save those who are lost. Grant that we, like Zacchaeus of Jericho, may eagerly seek the Savior, joyfully welcome him into our homes and lives, and gladly do what is pleasing in his sight. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you in unity with the Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.