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Date: February 24, 2019
Sermon Title: "Friends With Atheists"
Pastor: Rev. David Johnson Rowe
Scripture: Luke 19:1-10

Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, 'Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.' So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.' Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, 'Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.' Then Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.'

In our Church, for Alida and me, and therefore for you, the Sunday sermon is the result of a confluence of events. In other words, stuff comes together. That's not how many others do it. Lots of Churches work off a three-year cycle of Scriptures that rotate, so every week the preacher is given Scriptures for that week to preach about.

We don't do that. I know a pastor who prepared his sermons three years in advance. We definitely don't do that. My Uncle Lloyd got up every Sunday at 5 AM to prepare his sermon. That's cutting it way too close. We don't do that. For us, stuff comes together. Ideas. Verses. Events. Conversations. God's nudges, hints. Inspiration: the Holy Spirit. The upside to this approach is if you don't like the sermon, we can blame it on God!

Now, today's subject has been percolating for a while: Faith. Faith has been coming at me from every direction, hard, direct for three weeks. Day after day.

Chance encounter after chance encounter. By email, text, and in person. Faith. *What is it?* People want to know. How to get it? How to hold onto it? How to grow it, fix it, renew it, use it?

Faith. In some ways, "faith" is our bread and butter. Without faith, Christianity is a feel-good philosophy, a sort of theological Dr. Phil and Oprah. But toss faith in, then, well, then we're dealing with inexplicable miracles, indomitable strengths, amazing wonders, extraordinary courage. Those are the products of faith in everyday life for billions of people.

This fixation on faith began with Bible Study a few weeks ago, the story we just heard about Zacchaeus. Jesus comes to his town at the height of popularity, drawing a big crowd. Zacchaeus decides he wants to see Jesus, but from a safe distance, more than "arm's length." He climbs a tree along the main street to observe, to watch; perhaps to judge or gauge or analyze in some way.

Before I forget, it's vital to know that Zacchaeus was one of the bad guys. Everyone in his town despised him. He worked for Israel's enemy, the Roman government. His job as "chief tax collector" was to enrich Rome at the expense of his own Jewish people and line his own pockets at the same time. He was a "shakedown artist," an exploiter, an extortionist; let's face it, a traitor to his own people, his own neighbors.

Imagine his life. He's living in the lap of luxury, spending his time currying favor with the enemy, cheating his neighbors, and yet hated, a subject of scorn. People wouldn't talk with his wife in the market, other kids wouldn't play with his children, and Zacchaeus's only friends were other cheats, other traitors

I've never forgotten the poem from my favorite English class, "Richard Cory," by Edwin Arlington Robinson. Richard Cory was a man of substance in his town: successful, imperious, "rich," the poet wrote, "yes, richer than a king." The townspeople couldn't imagine such wealth. Then comes the final stanza:

*So on we worked, and waited for the light,
And went without the meat, and cursed the bread;
And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
Went home and put a bullet through his head.*

Despite it all, something was missing. Richard Cory was Zacchaeus minus Jesus, or Zacchaeus minus faith. They both had a lot, yet missing something. Something elemental. Something meaningful. Something satisfying. Whatever it was that was missing in Zacchaeus drove him to climb that tree. He wanted, the Bible says, "to see Jesus."

Not religion. Not clergy. Not Church. He didn't live that far from Jerusalem. With his favored position in government, he could have summoned any religious leader with just a flick of a finger; or had a VIP tour of the great Temple. Instead, this reviled, hated, true "enemy of the people" climbed a tree to see Jesus.

I've told you a lot about this priest friend I have in the Czech Republic, Father Tomáš Halík. I first learned about him from his book, *Patience with God*, which is all about Zacchaeus. Father Halik grew up under communism, officially atheistic communism, behind the Iron Curtain, under the old Soviet Union in Czechoslovakia, but my friend became Christian, became a secret priest until communism was overthrown.

Once that happened, the Czech people enthusiastically embraced modern democracy, capitalism, freedom, do-your-own-thing, anything-goes sort of unbridled secularism. In other words, Father Halik has spent his whole life under some form of atheism—whether old-time communism's antipathy toward religion or today's apathy, shoulder shrug about religion. We can use several names for it: "atheism," which means "without belief"; "agnostic," which means "I don't know, I'm not sure"; or "secularism," which puts religion out on the back porch, out of sight; or "humanism," which puts us—people, humans—as the be-all and end-all.

Whatever we call it, the end result is that religion, faith, God, Church, all that is irrelevant, dismissed, just not that important, out of the picture, sidelined. As a result, religious people, Church types like us, professionals like me, we feel threatened, by those other kinds of people who don't believe or don't hold dear what we count as precious.

We naturally are upset when we hear of some attempt to take "In God We Trust" off our money; or take "under God" out of the Pledge of Allegiance; or forbid Nativity scenes on town property or Christmas carols in schools. It feels as though they're coming after us.

But Father Halik has told me repeatedly, just watch. Keep your eyes open. Look around you. Look up. And you'll see Zacchaeus in the tree, lots of Zacchaeuses in lots of trees, all for the same reason: they want to see Jesus.

The modern-day dead-certain atheist, the "I'm not so sure" agnostic, the very busy, self-absorbed secular humanist—they are Zacchaeus. Maybe they are not as nonbelieving as they make themselves out to be or as we think they are. They may not actually be that dead certain, that self-absorbed. Maybe all they have, by itself, isn't enough.

I'm not saying they're ready to get baptized or join the Church, or sing in the choir or go to Appalachia or wear a cross in public. I'm saying they want to see

Jesus. There's something missing in their life. And they're open enough (and that's the key), open enough to break out of their comfort zone, to climb a tree, to see what this Jesus is about.

That's the beginning; and never underestimate the power of the beginning. Jesus said loud and clear if you have a tiniest amount of faith, a smidgen, a mustard-seed-sized faith, you can shake the world. Start somewhere. Get to the beginning. For Zacchaeus, it was climbing that tree.

I told you this sermon has been building for weeks, from every which way. People keep being put in my path who want to see Jesus. They want to know if the stuff he stood for is true, if the stuff he said works, if the life he lived matters, if the love he offered is real. This comes in every form from every age and gender. People searching . . . wondering . . . seeking.

One night I was here in the sanctuary waiting for the Confirmation young people to arrive. A woman walks in. She says, "I was just driving by, and it looks so pretty. I had to come in. Is that O.K.?" "Sure," I told her, "you want to sit down?" "No, thank you. I just wanted to see it." And then, for a half-hour, she stood there looking all around, taking it all in, talking, asking questions. Something was missing. Something was being found.

Last week I got a text from one of our Church kids away at college. "I was just wondering," he said, out of the blue, "all those teachings of Jesus, what's most important? And does it relate to . . . ?" And then there was a list of life's issues. He wanted "to see Jesus" in relation to his life.

And here's something that occurs quite often. Business people, men and women, all ages, some just getting started. We have lots of ongoing conversations. They're tasting success; there's money in their pocket. There are some nice toys, some dreams coming true. But now they've climbed up that tree. They may not want to go public yet. But they want to see Jesus. Who is he really? What's he about? How does he relate to me?

Of course, being up a tree is only half the story. An important half, but only half. It's what happens next that creates faith, faith that works, faith that lasts. Zacchaeus is up that tree looking for what's missing, willing to see Jesus. Eventually, Jesus comes along the road and, catch this sequence: Jesus looks up, sees Zacchaeus in the tree, calls him by name, *by name*, tells him to come down, and invites himself to Zacchaeus's house for dinner.

This is important stuff. Zacchaeus has separated himself from his town, his people, his religion. Zacchaeus has separated himself from the crowd by climbing up into a tree. And Jesus bridges all that separation. He calls him by name. How

did he know his name? Divine-Son-of-God intuition? Quite possibly. Or, he saw a man up in a tree, understood why, turned to a person nearby and asked, "Who's that?" What matters is Jesus wanted to know Zacchaeus personally, by name. Then he invites himself for dinner. Jesus wants to enter Zacchaeus's world, however secular or sinful or unpopular or sketchy or political Zacchaeus's world was, and it was all of that. Jesus wanted to get in there. If Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see who Jesus was, Jesus went to Zacchaeus's house to see who Zacchaeus was.

Some years ago, I became pastor of a Church in Massachusetts I was told this story by very proud parents. You'll wonder why in a moment. They told me the first Sunday I was there that their 16-year-old son surprised them by coming downstairs to join them just as they were leaving for Church, dressed in a pair of jeans and an old T-shirt. They told him, "You're not going to Church dressed like that!" "I guess not," he said. And walked back upstairs. I never did meet that boy.

Contrast that with Jesus's response to that not-very-popular Zacchaeus: personal, friendly, gracious, affirming. He cared enough to notice Zacchaeus. He cared enough to know Zacchaeus's name; he cared enough to go to Zacchaeus's house, to be with him, to enjoy him, to take him to heart. All the rest of the story flows from that. Zacchaeus announces he's giving away half of his wealth to help others; and he's going to make it right to everyone he cheated, paying them back four times over. That's a saved, redeemed, repented, changed life. That's a miracle. That's faith. Just a little bit at the beginning, and a lot later on.

That's what my Czech priest friend was getting at. Let's stop thinking that everyone who is not with us is against us; the folks who don't believe, or find it hard to believe, or keep us at a distance—they are the enemy or the competition. Instead, look around you, in your family, and your circle of friends, see the signs of something beginning, those first tentative steps as they climb a tree. Don't mock it. Don't underestimate it. Don't push it. The message for us is to not be afraid of the trees or who's up there. Be glad for it. Get to know them. Enter their heart, let them enter yours.

My son is an arborist, a professional tree-climber, the old-fashioned kind. He has a gigantic slingshot by which he shoots rope high up over a branch, and then hand over hand, he propels himself up into the tree, carrying his tools with him. Once he's up there, he can begin to clear away the dead branches. He does this for a living all week. But on the weekends he and his friends often head into the woods to do it for fun. He says there's nothing like being up there, looking around, seeing things in a new way. "It's always beautiful," he told me once. *Always beautiful.*

Zacchaeus would tell us the same thing. Up in that tree, away from "the madding crowd," unchained from all that bound him, looking for a new perspective starting with only the poorest faith, but desiring to see Jesus, the same Jesus who would turn out to know his name and want to spend time with him.

That's not a bad prescription for good Church: a place to see Jesus, to be known by name, to spend time together.

Let's close this morning by singing that great old hymn, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus," No. 585 in your Hymnal:

*What a friend we have in Jesus,
all our sins and griefs to bear!
What a privilege to carry
everything to God in prayer!
Oh, what peace we often forfeit,
oh, what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry
everything to God in prayer.*

*Have we trials and temptations?
Is there trouble anywhere?
We should never be discouraged;
take it to the Lord in prayer!
Can we find a friend so faithful
who will all our sorrows share?
Jesus knows our every weakness;
take it to the Lord in prayer!*

*Are we weak and heavy laden,
cumbered with a load of care?
Precious Savior, still our refuge,
take it to the Lord in prayer!
Do your friends despise, forsake you?
Take it to the Lord in prayer!
In his arms he'll take and shield you;
you will find a solace there.*