

You have seen them, maybe even at some point been one of them — people camping out for hours or days waiting for concert tickets, sporting events tickets, movie tickets, a new iPhone, etc. This week in Seattle many were camped out for free medical and dental care. A couple of summers ago when we were in Vancouver, BC, we noted long lines for blocks around the Victoria Secrets store (never did find out why). Led me to ask myself, What would I/we do to see Jesus?

Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem and his journey took him through Jericho. He was on his way to Jerusalem for the Passover and there were no plans to stop in Jericho. As he was headed into the city he does stop and heals a blind man (Luke 18:35-43) which maybe made the crowds even larger as he approached the city. There were no plans for a banquet in his honor, especially one by the city's hated tax collector. He was just passing through.

Zacchaeus, the city tax collector, wanted to see Jesus. He had several problems keeping him from accomplishing this: He was hated by most of the city, he was the tax collector, he was rich, he was unclean (according to the Law) and he was short. He may have heard that one of the disciples, a follower of Jesus, was also a tax collector. He wanted to see Jesus. Ken Bailey points out that this could be a dangerous situation for him. If he were to try to push his way through the crowd to the front (he was short) someone could deliver a punch or even worse. How would he know who had landed the blow or stab in such a crowd. He was hated. There would be little hope of his being able to catch a glimpse of Jesus.

Ever wonder why he so wanted to see Jesus? What stories had he heard? No one would believe that Jesus would stop and engage in a conversation with this unclean sinner. But, Jesus did not necessarily follow the norms of society.

Zacchaeus had an idea. He runs ahead (never would a middle eastern man run - remember the prodigal father - this too was unheard of) and he climbs up into a tree (middle eastern men do not climb trees). These two events were unheard of in his day. Zacchaeus so wants to see Jesus that he tosses the norms of society away and climbs a Sycamore tree. The Sycamore tree has wide leaves and one can easily hide in them and according to the Mishna the tree must be planted outside the city. Hopefully, by the time that Jesus reaches the tree the crowds will have dwindled away. He wants to see Jesus but does not want to be seen by Jesus.

However, someone sees him up in the tree. Maybe the crowd is yelling at him and calling him names. Making fun of this rich man, up a tree. They would all know who this was and his corruption. Bailey points out that only Rome and the tax-collector would know how much he had to collect - any extra was his and he was rich! They would expect Jesus to condemn Zacchaeus and his sins.

Jesus does just the opposite of what the crowd expected. He does join in calling Zacchaeus but calls his name. He does not point out his many sins. I am sure Zacchaeus was already aware of them. He does tell Zacchaeus to come down and invites himself to his home for dinner! He will spend the night with Zacchaeus. We miss the implications: Jesus was on his way to Jerusalem for the Passover and by entering into Zacchaeus' house he will make himself unclean (in the eyes of some). Is this how a Messiah would act? Should Jesus not be aware of the implications of his actions? This was not going to help his reputation among the religious leaders.

Zacchaeus does the only thing he can do; he invited Jesus and his followers to his home and the whole city. The banquet was prepared and during it Zacchaeus acknowledges his sins and

exaggerates what he will do (the exaggeration was expected). He will give half of his wealth to the poor and then, the exaggeration, he will repay any money he has taken four (4) times the amount. Everyone there would know that this would not be possible - would he even have records (a second set of books) - this is an amount that would be impossible for him to repay. Bailey, "If he does not exaggerate, the crowd will think he means the opposite". His life has been changed. We know the end of the story. We know how Zacchaeus responds to the unexpected grace and forgiveness he had just received from Jesus.

What happens when we truly see Jesus? All Zacchaeus wanted was to "see" Jesus. If only he could just catch a glimpse of him as he passed by. Just a glimpse from a Sycamore tree. He had heard so much about him - even the word of the healing of the blind man outside city had probably reached him. Is this the Messiah? What does the Messiah look like? There were no motives in his actions - he only hoped to catch a glimpse of Jesus as he passed by.

I wondered why the exaggeration in his promises. There was no way he can repay all that he had taken. Even if he wanted to it would be impossible. Yes, giving half to the poor would be doable but the rest... There was just no way and the audience understood and accepted this. The original hearers understood his exaggeration. There was no way Zacchaeus can pay for the grace and forgiveness he had just received from Jesus. It came to him as a gift. He could earn the grace he found in the Sycamore tree. It was freely given to him by the Messiah.

It was a gift that radically transforms him. Anthony Gielty, one of the most violent prisoners in Scotland who by the age of 19 had committed almost every crime one could imagine, including attempted murder and had been deemed almost beyond hope (even in his own eyes). But, his grandmother took him to church when he was younger - he had heard the stories. He writes about getting mail from his family,

"I just wish I could be forgotten, never to be contacted or seen again. I wanted to forget everyone so much: their love and concern only added to my pain and shame. I felt it was all fast. It was easier to hate and be hated than receive love."

Slowly those stories come back as he encounters a Catholic priest and a Catholic lay woman in prison. They are not turned off by his past — they demonstrate a Jesus who sees men in Sycamore trees and calls them down — today we might say, he is a present day Zacchaeus. He is now working with those who were once like him in the prison that once held him - sharing the grace, hope, LOVE and forgiveness he has found in Jesus.

Don't go looking for Jesus unless you are prepared for the unexpected.

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