

We Wish to See Jesus”

Luke 19:1-10

From the pulpit of First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, Illinois

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The preacher who climbs up to the pulpit at Community Presbyterian Church in Hampton, Virginia—my home church in my hometown—will find a small brass plaque that says in biblical Greek and in English, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.” It’s from John 12:21. These are the words the people used to ask Phillip about Jesus. They are hoping to meet Jesus. Philip finds Andrew, and Philip and Andrew go find Jesus—because the crowd wants to visit him.

“Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

This plaque in the pulpit of Community Presbyterian Church is a reminder to the preacher of what her congregation wants and what is expected of her. They want to see Jesus. And so, that little plaque is a big reminder to keep the sermon focused on Jesus. Help the people to see Jesus. Dive into the stories that Jesus told where the father welcomes the prodigal home, and the people are always reminded there’s a place for the outsider, the alien, the immigrant, the traveler, the nerd, the misfit. Tell us about Jesus welcoming the children. Tell us about Jesus telling-off the naysayers. Tell us about Jesus healing the blind man, and protecting that woman from being stoned to death. Tell us about the teacher who opens our eyes, and invites us into deep, wondrous mystery. Tell us about the one who doesn’t so much answer our questions, but, with parables, draws us into deeper, more interesting questions. Tell us about Jesus who gets boiling mad when he sees injustice. Tell us about Jesus who weeps for the world. Tell us about Jesus when he seems a little embarrassed by his pushy mother at that wedding at Cana. Tell us about Jesus who prays alone and breaks bread with a group of friends in an upper room. Tell us about what Jesus says about God, about justice, about anxiety, about money, about friendship, about discipleship, about patience, about persistence, about love. The crowd has come to Phillip and says, “Sir, we wish to see Jesus.”

The preacher who stood at the pulpit of Community Presbyterian Church was reminded of her job description: *We wish to see Jesus.*

I’m guessing that this is the hunger that filled Zacchaeus with longing. Zacchaeus, we can presume, is a man of faith. He is curious about God. We have every reason to believe he believes in God. He is enthused by the stories of God’s might, of how God’s people were delivered from captivity to freedom. No doubt he is touched by the stories of God’s love, how God is like a mother who bounces her child on her knee. We can guess Zacchaeus knew the songs: “I was glad when they said unto me, ‘Let us go into the house of the LORD.’” And Zacchaeus knew the scripture, “Let everything that breathes, praise the LORD” (Psalm 150).

Zacchaeus is breathing heavy in this text. Jesus is coming (!), and Zacchaeus wants to see him.

Knowing God creates a kind of hunger to learn, to grow, the deepen one’s service. Knowing God creates a kind of peace, on the one hand, and a restlessness to serve God more fully, most fully, on the other.

Zacchaeus is curious, to be sure, but possibility he is starving to connect with God in a new way, a deeper way.

And he’s heard about Jesus. Jesus is a respected Rabbi. Jesus is a healer. Jesus knows the tradition and he challenges some traditions in compelling ways. Jesus stands in the tradition of the prophets of yore. Jesus knows the songs, also, and the scriptures, and is steeped in the wisdom of the sages.

Phillip is not around to ask, but Zacchaeus' question is the same, "Sir, I wish to see Jesus."

The problem for Zacchaeus is that he's an outsider. He's a Jew, yes, maybe even a faithful one, but he's also a tax collector. Zacchaeus is a Jew who works for Rome. He collects taxes from Jews to give to Rome, and there's nothing more that the Jews want than to send the Romans packing. So, our friend Zacchaeus is contributing to our suffering, and he's no friend of ours.

Zacchaeus won't be introduced to Jesus by the town leaders. Zacchaeus is not on the welcome committee, nor will he be invited to the meet-and-greets with Jesus'. Zacchaeus will be barred from meeting the guest of honor.

The best he can do is climb a tree just to get a closer look. It's a crazy, unorthodox, and *faithful* thing to do.

When Jesus and the crowd came into town and approached that tree, Jesus couldn't help but notice the small man in that big tree. Jesus not only noticed, but invited him down, and invited himself over to Zacchaeus' house and, we presume, they became friends as Zacchaeus became a disciple.

This is just one of the stories that crowd wanted to know about as they approached Phillip. "Sir, we wish to see Jesus, the one who welcomes everyone, the one who invites us to follow, to serve, to love. We want to be part of his story. We want to love like he loves. We want to live with his kind of freedom, with his kind of passion. We want our lives to matter. We want to be healed so that we can reach out to others with God's healing in our hands.

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I'm grateful for all those men and women (and choirs and children and youth) who climbed into the pulpit at Community Presbyterian Church, in Hampton, VA, my home church in my hometown. I'm grateful for their stories and their witness. They showed me Jesus. They helped me find myself in the Gospel story. They affirmed me. They taught me that we *all* have something to give, that we are blessed *to be* a blessing.

They also introduced me to a small man with a big heart named Zacchaeus. May we all be as eager, as foolish, and as faithful as Zacchaeus who climbed a tree to get a better look at the Son of God.

AMEN.