

Sermon: When our life gets cut down to size

Today's scripture reading from Habakkuk, was my first experience using or referencing this prophet's words during my ministry. Habakkuk is unusual among the prophets in that he openly questions the working of God. In the first part of the first chapter, the prophet sees the injustice among his people and asks why God does not act. This was an intriguing reading to work within my message today.

Regardless of how tall we are, at some point in our lives we have known what it is like to be "short in stature." We have all been Zacchaeus. That is the reality for some of you here today. You are short in stature.

To be short in stature is not about one's physical height. It is a spiritual condition that affects people of all ages, shapes, and sizes. It is part of the human condition, and it is one of the threads that runs through this morning's readings.

In today's Old Testament reading, Habakkuk must have been feeling short in stature when he cried out "O Lord, how long shall I cry for help, but you will not listen? Or cry to you 'Violence!' and you will not save?" He surely must have felt short in stature as he witnessed destruction and violence, justice that never prevails, and judgments that are perverted.

Habakkuk's world does not seem all that distant or different from our own. Look at our world today and chances are you too will feel short in stature. Recall the times you have cried out to God but felt unheard and you will remember what it is like to be short in stature.

And in today's gospel Zacchaeus is described as a chief tax collector, and he is rich. As such he was an outcast to his own people. He had no standing in society. He was conspiring with the Roman occupiers. He preyed on his own people. He was looked down upon and despised by all. He was, as Luke says, "short in stature."

So I wonder, what is your Zacchaeus story? When have you been Zacchaeus? How have you experienced being short in stature? It happens in all sorts of ways. See if any of these fit or sound familiar to you.

Has life ever cut you down to size? Have you ever felt small and insignificant, ignored and of little importance? Have you ever felt as if you just do not measure up, that you are not enough?

Do you sometimes feel as if you are always on the outside, never an insider? Does it seem as if you cannot outgrow your past or the opinions of others? Are you constantly trying to prove yourself, not just to others but to yourself, or even to God? Does it seem as if your life is not growing, maturing, or deepening, and that your growth has become stunted?

Do you ever wonder if Jesus even notices you, knows who you are, knows your name? Have you ever felt powerless and overwhelmed by the circumstances of your life? Does it sometimes seem as if your value, worth, and dignity have been defined by your past actions and choices, what you have done and left undone?

Have you ever experienced being lost and anonymous in the crowds of life? Have you ever felt as if you just were not up to what life was asking of you?

If you answered yes to any one of those or a thousand other things like them then you know what it is like to be short in stature. You know what it is like to be Zacchaeus. I too know what that is like.

I often find myself reflecting on my past sins, trials and tribulations, and wondering how I would ever be able to survive moving forward. I was short in stature.

There have been many days since God's glory blessed me with this wonderful opportunity of sharing my life, faith and goodness with this congregation that feeling of being short in stature has almost disappeared.

If Jesus is going to do anything new with any of us, it must start with our lives as they are. To run away from, ignore, or try to escape our lives as they are denying Jesus anything to work with. The antidote to being short in stature is facing our life, not running from it. That is what Zacchaeus does in today's gospel.

He refuses to be lost in the crowd. He refuses to hide. He refuses to run away from who he is. Instead, he runs ahead of the crowd and climbs a tree. Everyone could see what he was doing. Luke says he did that so he could see Jesus. But here is what I wonder. What if he climbed that tree because he wanted to be seen by Jesus? What if that was how he faced the truth and reality of his own life? What if he was not just climbing a tree but was climbing the cross of being short in stature?

What if Zacchaeus was offering all that he was and all that he had to Jesus? What if that was him crying out, “Here I am. This is my life. Look at me, claim and recognize me too as a Son of Abraham?”

And that’s exactly what Jesus did. He stopped and “looked up” at Zacchaeus.

I cannot help but wonder if that might not have been the first time anyone had ever looked up to Zacchaeus. Jesus looked up to him with love and acceptance. Jesus looked up and invited himself into Zacchaeus’ home, into his life. He saw more than a chief tax collector, a rich man, and a man short in stature. He saw what Zacchaeus could not see for himself. He saw one of his own.

In the eyes of the crowd Zacchaeus is a sinner. In his own eyes he is a tiny little man, short in stature. But in the eyes of Jesus Zacchaeus is a Son of Abraham. Zacchaeus was sought, seen, and saved. The lost one had been found.

That is what I want when I am short in stature. Don’t you? Sure, I want to see Jesus but more than that I want to be seen by Jesus, even when I do not like or cannot accept what I see in myself. Isn’t that true of us all?

We want to know that Jesus sees more in us than we can see in ourselves. We want to be recognized and called by name by the God who created us. We want to be reminded that we are more than what we have become. We want to know that despite what has become of our lives we too are a child of Abraham.

We want Jesus to call us out our tree, off the cross of being short in stature, and into a new life. That is what we all want. It is what Zacchaeus wanted. This is our day because that's the promise today's gospel holds for each one of us.

Whatever it is that has made you short in stature and run you up the tree, which is the place where Jesus stops, looks up with love and acceptance, and calls you back down into a new life. Let us not turn away from that place. Let us not turn away from the face of Christ.

It is so easy to hear the name Zacchaeus and think only of the tiny little man and to see the ways we have become short in stature but that's only part of the truth.

Do you know what the name Zacchaeus means? It means "pure," "clean," or "innocent." That is the greater truth. That is what Jesus saw in Zacchaeus. It is what he sees in you and me, even when we do not see it in ourselves or each other. He looks up and calls us back to our truest selves.

"Zacchaeus," Jesus says to us, "you come down here right now. That is not who you are. That is not your place. You come down. Amen