

Timothy Weber, Ph.D.
St. Andrews Lutheran Church
April 6, 2025

“OUT ON A LIMB”
Luke 19: 1-10

We are in dangerous territory. This danger seems invisible, subtle, innocent. ” But this danger was the core issue of the Reformation and for Luther in the 16th century and it has snuck into our time as well under the radar. This is much bigger than it seems.

To frame the problem: the essence of the Christian faith is grounded only in Christ—the grace, the mercy, the transforming Spirit, the power of the cross, the open tomb of Easter, and God’s claim on our entire lives. These are the ROOTS of faith—which are primary. Then there are the FRUITS of faith, our lives in response: our loving labors in the world, our acts of service for justice, our efforts to bring wholeness to everyone. Both roots and fruits constitute the Christian life, but the priority is absolutely critical. The roots of faith in Christ are primary because they define us, birth us, renew us, resurrect us. The fruits of faith are important, but secondary-- the blossoms of our blessedness. Roots are the water of life. Fruits are the flowers of life. Roots are the source of light. Fruits are the beams of light. The priority is critical.

So what’s the danger? Over time, it seems the church has drifted toward the fruits of faith as the dominant focus. The roots of faith are noted but more background like a simple “nod to God.” The fruits of faith, however, draw the crowd, it’s where the action is—what we’re up to, what we’re doing, our creations and compassions, our causes and concerns. We humans want something concrete to produce. This appeals to our basic nature. The drift toward fruits is focused on being good, doing good, and moral lessons on how to live according to what God would want us to do.

But when Jesus is seen more as a teacher than savior, the redeeming power and wonder and grace of Christ essentially becomes unnecessary. That was Luther’s core concern: the diminishment of Christ’s necessity and centrality. The Dalai Lama and many others have proclaimed we need ethics without religion. Religion divides, is more ancient and packed with myth and

strange stories. But ethics are useful, hands on, practical, and needed in this deviant world. In this kind of culture, Christ is more “one among many flavors,”—an option, not a necessity. When Christ begins to look like any other good teacher, and the glory and wonder of God recedes, we are faced with the painful verdict that at the cross of Christ on Good Friday, we are not merely observers, but we are executioners of Christ. The cross is for us, but the cross is also because of us. Let’s turn to the story of Zacchaeus in Luke 19 to see what we might learn about roots and fruits.

Who was Zacchaeus? He lived in Jericho with his family. The writer Luke notes that Zacchaeus was a rich and secure. But his reputation in Jericho was one of dirt and disgust. Why? He was a tax collector. Tax collectors were Jewish citizens, but worked for the occupying power of Rome. They collected taxes and tolls and tariffs, but also inflated the prices to pad their own pockets, exploiting their neighbors, cheating them, and brewing resentment and disdain.

On top of this, Zacchaeus was the “chief” tax collector and got more money from all his direct reports who also abused the neighbors. Zacchaeus was rich in money, but poor in spirit—hated, despised, isolated. And Luke also notes Zacchaeus was “short in stature.” The average height of a male in those days was around 5ft.5 inches. So, Zacchaeus was likely around 5 ft. and, in those days, it was considered a disability.

So, in many ways, Zacchaeus had to be struggling. Maybe he looked OK on the outside, but was suffering on the inside. In spite of how we might look to others, people may not be aware of the pains, hurts, laments, sorrows, worries that we carry deep within our guts and souls. We suffer in silence. And we have “outcasts” within our hearts—those things buried in our shadows we want to hide from others. We are all divided selves. These outcast parts of ourselves can terrorize our bodies and minds and send us twisting and turning into the night. Zacchaeus’ agitation must have been mounting. Desperation often is the only thing that ignites change. He needed someone, not something. He needed a relationship, not a reference resource. He was ready to risk. He hears about Jesus. Then he goes out on a limb to simply see Jesus, and that begins it all.

The encounter with Jesus, the roots, begins to undo Zacchaeus’ world. I want to summarize the encounter with the acronym: SAVES like in: Jesus SAVES.

Each letter refers to a word. And the first four letters—SAVE—focus on roots...and the last letter, S, focuses more on fruits. That says something about the priorities.

So, let's pick it apart. "S" stands for "Seeking." With all the talk in our world about finding God, we see here that God is seeking us. Abraham Heschel, the great Jewish philosopher wrote a book, "God in Search of Man." God is the "hound of heaven" in search for us to invite us into the freedom of both truth and imagination.

Jesus sees Zacchaeus, calls him by name, orders him to hurry down the tree, and then commands him "I must stay at your house!" Is Jesus seeking you with an urgency like with Zacchaeus? What do you think God wants with you? What does God need to say to you that you are having trouble hearing? Do you create a space in your life—a space of prayer, a space of reading, a space of meditation, a space of discernment—where you can be found by a God who seeks you?

I'm sure Zacchaeus was on edge when he sat with Jesus at the table to talk, given his dirty history. What would Jesus say to you about your history if you were talking with him at the table? The crowd certainly was upset when Jesus entered the home of the despised. We consider the despised ones to be off limits. But Jesus moves toward the despised, deplorable Zacchaeus. Jesus must see something of value in the one we would call despicable. It's hard to welcome the outcast, but even harder to move toward the despised one, maybe even one you would call enemy. Might be dangerous. If approached maybe Zacchaeus would slap another tariff on your taxes! Would you approach one you consider despicable? Maybe a family member, even a church colleague. How far does your love stretch? Probably not far enough. It's easy to love the lovable, even the unknowns. But when it comes to the despised, deplorable one who might even be termed "enemy," it will not be your love which is too weak, but only the love and power of the Spirit that will be able to work the miracle of love. Our love is incapable when it needs to suffer too much. We are simply instruments of the Spirit. It's not your love, but the Spirit working through you which is your only hope.

But there's another outcast here. Zacchaeus was an outcast in his community, but he also had internal outcasts as we do—those parts of us we have hidden away in fear...parts we dislike, hide in shame, cover in secrecy. We all have

internal outcasts. We are divided selves. We hunger for wholeness so we don't fear our internal outcasts. At the table, Jesus welcomes all of Zacchaeus—the full range of his life including his internal darkness, his brokenness, his secrets. Zacchaeus is offered the gift of relationship with Jesus—all of him, all his life. When this spacious grace is given for us, and we are heard and we are loved, our hearts are tenderized and primed to surrender. Zacchaeus is loved into loving...loved into loving...love into loving. So are we.

“A stands for “Anchoring.” How do we anchor ourselves in a world that is packed full of winds and waves and worries? Zacchaeus was the boss, but was also floating like a leaf in the wind—unsure, unsteady. So he climbs a tree to find an anchor in his sea. Notice how Jesus commands the moment—he knows his name, tells him to hurry, and insists that he will come to Zacchaeus’ home, to eat, and talk, and sleep. It’s almost like Jesus owns Zacchaeus. Jesus invades Zacchaeus’ life and commands him. We don’t like to be ordered around. But Zacchaeus surrenders.

This is an important point. Zacchaeus’ surrender points us to another reality. We do not own our lives. God does. God’s word brought us into existence. God’s word has sustained us life-long. And God’s word will catch us on the cliff of death. We have no right to our existence. All of us—our very selves and what we have and have become—all this is owned by God. We have no claim on our lives. But in reality, we live as if none of this were true. We claim our rights and powers and resist invaders. But in the encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus is ready to surrender himself to the presence of God, the heart of God, the will of God. St. Paul writes in I Corinthians, “You do not belong to yourselves any longer...You and I are not our own, we are Christ’s.” Surrendering to the truth of our insignificance and surrendering to the reality of God’s magnificence is the root of true joy, our sure anchor. And this was happening to Zacchaeus.

“V” stands for “Visiting.” In our life with God, we tend to pay homage to Christ instead of making our home in Christ. Paying homage is not making Christ our home. A term for this is “Honey Bucket Christianity”—on the trail of life, visit God like an outhouse to do your business, especially in an emergency. Thank God we have outhouses and houses of worship when we need them. But then, when our business is done or when the emergency is

passed, get back on the trail of life to all those many, many things that seem to matter more. “Honey Bucket Christianity.”

Our Lord wants much more with us—a daily relationship, our conversations, our prayers, our debates, our anger, our thanksgiving, our confessions, our desires, our complaints, our fears, our hopes. Our Lord wants a full meal deal, A to Z and beyond—our total selves, not just a courtesy “nod to God,” primarily in emergencies. That is like grabbing the gift and forgetting the Giver. Did you ever have that kind of experience—giving a gift and being forgotten as the giver? It hurts. A thank you note is not enough. Jesus wants all of us, all the time, as with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus surrenders to Jesus because he wants a relationship of new life, not just tips on how to be a better person.

The word “visit” comes from the Latin word “videre” which means “to see.” Praying is visiting with God and praying that the God of mercy might see all of us....that nothing stays hidden. But visiting means something else. Jesus meets Zacchaeus where he is, but does not leave him as he is. This is critical. God’s love for us means God won’t accept us as we are—God always wants more for us than we want for ourselves. We are wedded to the familiar. God always seems more interested in the surprise. So part of visiting with God is being ready to be upended. I like Anne Lamott’s note about grace. “Grace finds us where we are, but does not leave us where it found us.” The Spirit of God has a vision for us beyond what we can ask or think.

“E” stands for “Empowerment.” We humans tend to overestimate our abilities and understate our broken wills and hardened hearts. Pep talks on loving, even with Christian frosting, tend to fall flat. This shouldn’t be a surprise. In the Bible again and again, we hear that we are in bondage to other gods and other interests and many idols. Our will is broken. Our hearts are filled with mixed motives and chained in prison by the muscles of our pride. Long ago, Luther in his famous 1524 book “The Bondage of the Will” said our will is under captivity—can’t be trusted. David Brooks from the New York Times comments that we are gloriously made but also deeply broken—all of us, no exceptions. How often in our world has this diagnosis been repeated. The first of Luther’s famous 95 theses in 1517 nailed on the church door states that Jesus Christ willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance. It is quite amazing that this is the first, the primary, statement Luther makes in this historic challenge to the church. Repentance—Luther

believed that if we did not live into the truth of our human condition, Christ would be quite unnecessary, and the “fruits” of faith would dominate. On the other hand, Christ becomes absolutely necessary if we are boldly honest about our true condition. And what also is clear is that we are unable on our own to truly live into our discipleship. Only the love of God is full of power to power us, the powerless. Zacchaeus changes not because of a lesson or pep talk, but because of a relationship—he is loved into loving.

To illustrate this, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German Lutheran pastor who helped lead the resistance movement in Germany against Hitler, wrote his most famous book, “The Cost of Discipleship,” to underscore the suffering costs of those who follow Christ. Bonhoeffer joined the failed attempt to assassinate Hitler and was hung in a concentration camp on April 9, 1945 only days before the Allied forces liberated Germany—80 years ago this coming Wednesday.

What empowered Bonhoeffer to manifest these fruits of suffering love? It wasn’t his good ideas. In fact, Bonhoeffer’s faith has been more fodder than on fire for a long time. He had been more of an academic Christian. His sustained experience in the roots of faith began when he went to New York to study in 1930. In that year, his faith flamed forth as a result of his relationships in the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem. This Black communion of saints welcomed him into a worship and fellowship of wonder and joy and music and singing and powerful proclamations of life in Christ by the senior pastor Adam Clayton Powell. Bonhoeffer’s immersion into this Black communion of saints turned his heart and lit his spirit on fire. These roots empowered his fruits. He was loved into loving with a blazing fire.

Finally, “S” stands for “Sending.” I will be brief. We are sent into the world to bear fruit to so many who are suffering, who are poor, who are oppressed. This is the summons of the Gospel. But the heart of the Gospel are these roots of our lives, daily, in the life of Christ. Zacchaeus just didn’t get tips on living and loving. He entered a profoundly new life in Christ, a powerful new home for him, and his heart was turned inside out by the beauty and fire of the Spirit. Having his life shaken by the power of the Gospel’s roots, Zacchaeus’ heart was filled with fresh fruits. He shocked the neighbors. He gave half of his possessions to the poor and gave back fourfold what he gained by fraud. He didn’t have to learn how to love. He needed to be free. He was loved into

loving. And that is the power of life in Christ—We are loved into loving. May our lights shine bright by the cross of Christ and the fire of the Spirit.

.