

You and the rest of the disciples are following along with Jesus, John and Peter alone up front and chatting with Him as usual. You're all still absolutely buzzing about what just happened on the outskirts of Jericho, the blindman healed all because he had the courage to keep crying out for mercy from Jesus. "Recover your sight; your faith has made you well" was all that Jesus had to say, and the man just walked on his merry way, singing and laughing and seeing and no longer stumbling.

So you better believe the crowds have come out to see this Jesus. They're just as excited as you are, maybe more so; they don't get to see this everywhere they go I suppose. Some have gathered to have their illnesses healed, others look hungry and have a glimmer of hope in their eyes there might be a feast today. There are people scrambling to look out of every window, lineups forming down each street turnoff, and people are clamoring to get Jesus' attention.

But up ahead, you see that only one person has Jesus' attention. His eyes are looking a ways down the street, up a little, and you follow his gaze to see a middle aged man, all alone except some birds, sitting in a tree.

The disciples aren't the only ones who have realized that Jesus has zeroed in on this man, as the crowds slowly shift from the loud cries for attention to hushed whispers of gossip. "He's walking towards Zacchaeus," "Why is Zacchaeus in a tree? Have some decency, man!" Someone shouts out "Don't bother Jesus, he'll just steal some of your money too."

Zacchaeus, you see, was chief tax collector, one who took your money, and gave it to the king, which means if you were a Jew, he gave it to your enemy. But he didn't just demand your money to give it to someone essentially blasphemous, no; he took more than necessary in order to pad his own bank account. So needless to say, everyone bore a little bit of a grudge towards him.

Everyone wanted Jesus' attention, so they're not happy that He is focused solely on this grown man, a sinner, sitting in a tree.

The interaction is quick. As soon as Jesus reaches the bottom of the sycamore tree he shouts up “Zacchaeus!” Wait. He already knows the man? “Hurry down—I need to stay at your place.”

Everyone around would be astounded. Jesus has asked to reside, for the evening if not for longer, at the house built up on stolen riches; he’ll be eating a feast provided by sinful means. And if Jesus knows Zacchaeus’ name already, surely He must know what he does, what he is—a sinner.

Well of course Jesus knows. Just as He’s known the sins of Matthew, formerly tax collector now disciple, and of Peter, proud Peter, and of the people He chooses to dine with, the other “tax collectors and sinners,” just as He knows the uncleanness of the lepers He’s near, just as much as He knows no matter who in the crowd He stayed with that night, they too would be in the “unclean sinner” category.

Not only does Jesus know Zacchaeus is a sinner, and a publicly known sinner at that, this is certainly a reason why Jesus hones in on him. No one, not even Zacchaeus, can deny that he has sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. And more, this shamed man has forsaken his last shred of public dignity by climbing a tree, and Jesus picks him, not because he’s demonstrated such boldness and fearlessness seeking Jesus at any cost, but because this man has clearly heard that Jesus is here and Jesus can help, and that ringing of the Gospel in his ears and heart has sent Him looking to hear more of it.

And no sinner in need of forgiveness, no outcast in need of welcome, no dying person in need of new life is ever turned away by Christ. He’s a great Reformation character for us to celebrate, the chief of tax collectors given grace, the Holy Spirit working faith in even the greediest of men.

But he’s not alone up there, not today at least. I must’ve been mistaken when I said that earlier, because beside Zacchaeus are two others, two little girls who wanted to come and hear more about Jesus, who wanted to receive the gifts of Christ as well, who wanted His help in this life and the next. Right next to the chief tax collector are Kayleigh and Kara, wanting even a glimpse of Jesus as He passes by today.

I say this because what Jesus says in Jericho is precisely what Jesus says and does here in Grande Prairie this very hour. Jesus sought a man who couldn't deserve His love and He loved Him anyway; He showed Him friendship in spite of His outcast status, He showed Him care in spite of His sin. He said to Him, "I want to come dwell with you." That is, "I am bringing salvation right to you, that it may live with you all your days. You didn't earn it; you can't prove that you deserve to keep it; it's simply a free gift to those who know they need help from outside themselves, and it's yours."

Don't worry girls. You don't need to go home and make up the spare bed for Jesus to sleep in tonight; you don't have to cook some more chicken and potatoes and set up an extra plate at the dinner table, but I mean it when I say that Jesus calls to you today and says, "Kayleigh, Kara, hurry down because I need to come stay with you."

To all of you, actually. Though you might have more back support in a pew than on a branch, both are equally uncomfortable places to come and see Jesus, or to come and hear Jesus, but week after week, you sinners undeserving of His goodness and even holiness come because you have been given faith by the murmurings of who Jesus is and what He can do and that draws you back again and again and again. Your greed, your selfishness, your lust and blasphemy and laziness, all these sins legitimately count you out, just as Zacchaeus shouldn't have received Jesus' attention let alone gifts. But that's what grace is!

It comes to us unasked, unforced, unearned. It was grace that Zacchaeus heard enough to come running and hear more (because clearly the gift of faith was already forming); it was grace that sent the Gospel through parents and grandparents and friends and VBS and Sunday School teachers to Kayleigh and Kara that they would be brought to this point today; it was grace that kept you from falling away from the faith this week so you could come back and receive Christ and all His wonderful promises once again.

And it is grace that released Zacchaeus from his greed so he could give back what he stole, that he could restore generously. As salvation is bestowed upon the lost, as Zacchaeus, Kayleigh, Kara, me and you are freed from our sin and from the threat of death, as Christ in fact raises us from the dead, we are sent forth free and loving.

Now again, very appropriate for Reformation Sunday, Jesus announces that salvation has come to this house, but it's not because Zacchaeus responded so fervently to the Gospel and acted so generously, but in fact the reverse. As the Holy Spirit gives you faith, you are no longer bound to serve the gods you served before. Zacchaeus had clung to his wealth to satisfy him and protect him, but that was no longer necessary because he believed in Christ. We no longer need to seek out toys and prestige and money or anything else that we replace God with, because God will provide for us better, Christ will care for us better. And so we can ignore what we once held dear and now love our neighbours more freely, we can live more generously, because we have been given faith.

Because Christ has called to Kara and Kayleigh, to each of you here today, and said "Let me come stay with you. I have brought salvation to you who were lost" and now you have life. Your sins are washed away and Christ's salvation is yours. Though you have fallen short of the glory of God, today once again you receive Christ's redemption, you receive forgiveness by His blood, and you receive it all by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. This is most certainly true.

Amen.