

**Moravian Women Sunday
November 3,2019**

Welcome & Right Hand of Fellowship

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Children's message

Hymn #787. He Leadeth Me

Scripture: Luke 19: 1-10

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Benediction

Tree Climbers

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Luke 19:1-10

My guess and hope is that most of us grew up climbing trees. Luke's familiar story of Zacchaeus climbing a sycamore tree offers an invitation for each of us to take a few moments to remember the trees we climbed back in the day. - Trees like the shady maple tree still standing beside our Moravian church in Clemmons, North Carolina. - A tree my friends and I sometimes climbed after our children's choir practice on Sunday evenings.

Or trees like the large crepe myrtle tree that stood beside the house where I grew up. - One we would climb when we were "astronauts in training." With an open umbrella, we jumped from a limb, maybe seven or eight feet high, hoping the umbrella would work like a parachute to slow our fall. (It didn't.)

Or maybe trees like the apple trees beside an old farmhouse. I remember climbing these trees for my grandmother on a Saturday morning. - Shaking their limbs, so the apples would fall for us to gather.

As you remember the trees you climbed, perhaps you knew more flexible trees than these. Sometimes while wandering through the woods, my friends and I would come to young trees. Maybe 15 feet high or so. Not very big around the trunk. Just a few inches in diameter. One at a time, we would climb those trees. It was actually more of a shimmy than a climb. And as we shimmied close to the top... As we worked ourselves up as high as we could, the tree would slowly bend, arching over to bring us back gently to the ground.

Did you ever climb a tree like that? Robert Frost wrote a poem about climbing birch trees in this way:

*I'd like to go by climbing a birch tree,
And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more
But dipped its top and set me down again.
That would be good both going and coming back.
One could do worse than be a swinger of birches.¹*

Swinging birch trees and the poet's reference to climb up toward heaven remind me of the sycamore growing in this morning's Gospel. Not so much the tree itself, but the movement of the one who climbs the tree, Zacchaeus. For Zacchaeus climbs that sycamore tree, desiring an experience that will lift him off the ground and closer to heaven. He wants to see Jesus. He climbs in order to catch a glimpse of heaven, seeking something of God in the personality of the prophet passing by.

¹ Birches, by Robert Frost

What draws Zacchaeus away from his tax collector's table on this day is a desire to rise above the animosity he has created for himself here in Jericho. Down here on the ground he has sold his soul to Rome. The Empire has appointed him chief tax collector. He is in charge of the entire district surrounding Jericho. His duty is to extract from the region the exact amount of a heavy tax calculated by Rome. After that amount is collected, he is free to charge any additional amount for himself. Rome gets its share, and Zacchaeus pockets whatever more he chooses to collect. This arrangement with the Empire makes Zacchaeus not only a very wealthy man, but also a severely detested one.

And so on this day in Jericho, Zacchaeus is no doubt the least popular person in the crowd. Every other rabbi he has known has cut him off from the community, branding him a social outcast. Zacchaeus however has heard that the Rabbi en route sits at table with tax collectors, sharing meals with people such as he. He wants to see Jesus, because in this man from Nazareth, there is something of the grace of God that he has longed to know. So when he can not see over the crowds, he does not turn back. Rather he runs ahead, and he climbs. He climbs the sycamore above the ostracism he encounters on the ground. He climbs above the harsh reality of his existence. He climbs to see Jesus, and the climb he makes proves to be nothing less than transcendent.

A transcendent experience is one that inspires a higher understanding of God and our place in the world. It is an experience that lifts us out of our day-to-day reality, convincing us that life can be more abundant than what we know. It is an experience that rarely happens without human effort. Indeed, the word "transcend" is actually rooted in a Latin word meaning "to climb." (*scandere*)

Zacchaeus was not thinking about any of this when he climbs that sycamore tree. He just does it. And what about us? My guess is that many if not most of us come to worship, because like Zacchaeus, we, in some fashion or form, want to see Jesus. So we climbed out of bed this morning. And we climbed into our clothes. And we climbed in our cars. And we climbed up the stairs to this sanctuary. And we climbed into a pew. We might not have thought about it in this way, but could it be that we did all this climbing, because we, as well, are looking for a transcendent experience. - One that will take us above ourselves, above our quiet desperation and fears, above our insecurities, above our negative attitudes and sins. We want to see Jesus, believing he comes to offer us a life greater than the reality we know. - Lifting us up to a higher understanding of God and our place in Creation.

We come. And we climb. And we pull ourselves up a little closer to heaven in the greeting of friends and neighbors.

In the singing of hymns.

In the praying of a liturgy.

In the confession of sin.

In the reading of scripture.

In the hearing of the Word

In the sharing of the Holy Communion.

In the receiving of a benediction.

We climb like Zacchaeus, wishing to see Jesus. And yet this tree of worship we climb is more like a birch than a sycamore, for at the end of the hour, after climbing a little closer to heaven, *this tree can bear no more, but dips its top and set us down again.*

We are set down again to return to our homes, and to our schools, and to our places of work and leisure. We came and we climbed, but did we see Jesus? Well, maybe on a good Sunday. Perhaps on a good Sunday, we saw, or heard, or in some other way experienced the near presence of Christ. It's different for each of us from Sunday to Sunday. Sometimes we see Jesus. Other times, maybe not.

But there is something that happens to each of us every Sunday when we come to worship. For the very act of coming to this place takes our focus off of ourselves and places it on Christ. This active desire to see Jesus.... this climbing to church on a Sunday morning... focuses our hearts and minds on something... Someone... greater than ourselves. And at least for an hour each week, we are less self-centered and more centered on God, the source of our greatest life and salvation.

Before Zacchaeus climbed that tree, he was all wrapped up in himself, in his fine wardrobe and splendid home, in his lavish table, and in all the wealth he had collected from the neighbors who detested the ground he walked on. But when Zacchaeus turned his attention away from himself and began looking for Jesus, he began to discover the greater life of the kingdom of God.

The genius of Jesus is at work once again, when he calls to Zacchaeus: *Hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.* The Savior knows if he can only get Zacchaeus to turn away from himself and enter the greater life of serving others, then salvation will come to his home. In essence Jesus says: *Zacchaeus, it's not all about you. I'm coming to sit at your table so you can provide hospitality to me. I'm coming to free you from your self-centeredness. I'm coming to show you just how much greater life can be when you give yourself to others rather than taking what is others for yourself.*

And as a result of this transcending experience, Zacchaeus, who has never given anyone anything, now gives Jesus a seat at his table. He gives Jesus food, and drink, and place to rest for the night. And as Jesus frees him from his self-centeredness, Zacchaeus can't stop giving. He gives half of his possessions to the poor. If he has defrauded anyone, he gives that person four times the amount he has taken for himself.

No, we may not see Jesus every Sunday we come to worship, but the very act of coming to worship takes our focus off of ourselves and places it on Christ. And week by week, with each climb taking us closer to heaven before returning us gently to the earth, we become a little more like the Christ we climb to see, centered on God and the greater good of all humanity. In essence, by God's grace salvation comes home to us. Christ saves us from ourselves.

I'd love to see Jesus as clearly as Zacchaeus did that day from the sycamore tree. But until I do, I'll keep on climbing and swinging the birches, for indeed, *one could do worse... much worse... than being a swinger of birches.*