

**“Treetop Experiences”**

**Luke 19.1–10**

**The Rev. Hal Chorpenning, Plymouth Cong'l UCC, 31 October 04**

How many of you like climbing trees? Okay, how many of you liked climbing trees in your youth? I remember as especially good hemlock tree that grew just outside my bedroom window in Connecticut when I was a kid. It enabled me to have independent access to the great outdoors, thanks to its ladder-rung-like branches.

But Zacchaeus, a main character in our story, doesn't use a tree as a means of escape, but rather as a means of trying to see something. He gets more than he bargained for: Zacchaeus gets a good glimpse of Jesus traveling toward him, but something else happens in the story. He has his perspective changed from his perch high above the crowd; he's got a new, broader vista.

Have you ever had that kind of experience? Being in a high place and then looking around and finding a new way of looking at something? If you're standing in a narrow crevice in Arizona, you may not know that you're in the Grand Canyon, at least until you get a new perspective after you walk out of the crevice.

In spite of my early experience with the hemlock tree, I am deathly afraid of heights. I get full-blown nausea when I look over the edge of a tall building. A few years back, though, the staff of the Connecticut Conference, where I was serving, had a retreat day at Silver Lake (which is their version of La Foret). We worshipped together, did some strategic planning, as well as some team building. And, of course, this involved the high ropes challenge course. If you're not familiar with a ropes course, imagine half-inch steel cables strung between pine trees 50 feet off the ground. Due to a lot of peer pressure (and lots of convincing myself that I could conquer my acrophobia), I shinnied up a pine tree with huge stakes driven into it, ruining a perfectly good pair of khakis with gobs of pine pitch. I just stared into the tree trunk and didn't look down once. Then I got to the cable that I was supposed to walk across to another pine tree. Well, I looked down and nearly lost my lunch. The first step out onto the cable was the most difficult. I just stared directly into the destination pine tree and kept going slowly and steadily. And as I made my way through this harrowing experience, I had a very strong sense of Jesus saying the line from the end of Matthew's gospel: "I am with you always, to the end of the age." Saying that as a mantra got me to the other side of the cable...then they told me I had to let myself fall backward off the cable and let the belay person lower me by means of my harness.

I learned a couple of things, though, due to that new perspective. I acquired the knowledge that if I really had to do something, even if it scared me to death, I could do it. I learned that whatever I go through, the spirit of Christ is there. And I learned that I'm still mortally afraid of heights and will never do such a foolish thing again.

Going out of your way to gain a new perspective can be a very scary thing to do; it's not always pleasant. The new vision you acquire may not be what you expected. Or it might be better than you could possibly have imagined. Getting to that place may not be easy: you might need to climb or scramble or duck or crawl there. You might have to confront some deep fears and make yourself *vulnerable*. You might need to put some of your assumptions on hold. There are definitely risks involved: sometimes physical, other time emotional or spiritual. Will you take the risk?

At the Alban Institute course I did two weeks ago, on leading congregational change, the instructor talked a lot about "balcony time," or time spent away from church to get a broader, strategic outlook. When you're in a theater (the old kind, not a multiplex), if you're sitting with a throng of people, you can't see what's going on among them as a

whole, but if you climb into the balcony, you can get a new perspective on how they are reacting as a whole. And getting more “balcony time” is an important way that I’m going to approach the coming year, either at a retreat center or hiking in the mountains.



At meaningful places through the Biblical narrative, you’ll find a recurring motif. The person who will gain a new vision, a new insight, a new understanding, will ascend a high place and there be enlightened or transformed.

The story of the Exodus (which is actually in the last part of the book of Deuteronomy) concludes Moses following God’s instruction and ascending Mount Nebo to look across the Jordan into the promised land. And, of course, Moses then has a transformation: he dies, never having made it himself to the promised land.

The transfiguration story involves Jesus and several disciples going up a mountain to pray – seeking transformation. The voice of God tells them “This is my son, my chosen; listen to him.”<sup>1</sup> Not only was Jesus himself transformed, but those who shared the experience on the mountaintop also were changed.

Though not on a mountaintop, Zacchaeus is in a high place where he can see things differently.

So, when you’re experiencing transformation, how do you come down from the dizzying heights, and why? Yesterday, I was up in Allenspark with our Men’s Fellowship for a bit of their retreat this weekend, and they were trying to address this question: how to bring the mountaintop experience home. How do you do that? When you’ve had a momentous moment of transformation, how do you carry it forward, and not leave it when the excitement wears off? I’ll come to that a bit later, but think of how you put transformation into practice.



As I said earlier, transformation and change can be very scary. It can be like journeying into the unknown region. Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass* uses those words:

“Darest thou now O soul,  
Walk out with me toward the unknown region,  
Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow.

There are times when we shift our own perspective willingly – seeking transformation. And there are moments in our lives when we are involuntarily thrust into the midst of it. Shifting your own perspective is usually a good deal easier than having your perspective shifted for you. What are the times in your life when you’ve been handed transformation on a plate without requesting it? Perhaps it’s the death of a parent or a spouse. Maybe it’s a health scare. (First heart attacks tend to be a very big wake-up call for men.) It could be a family crisis, like having a teenager who is following what you think are all the wrong paths. Or having parents who you think are so clueless that they’re ruining your life. Maybe it’s coming to grips with your own addiction, whether it’s alcohol, other drugs, food, or sex.

I have an Episcopal priest friend who refers to these times as AFOGs – AFOG stands for Another “Frightening” Opportunity for Growth. (She didn’t actually use the word “frightening.”) How many times have you had an AFOG – a time when you’ve been hit up side the head with the proverbial two-by-four?

I had one of these experiences recently, and I’ve shared it with the Pastoral Relations Committee, the Personnel Committee, and the Church Council. One indicator has been

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<sup>1</sup> Lk 9.35

some stress-related health issues, which I'm now attending to. I have gotten in touch with my own addiction to work. I always swore that I wouldn't turn into my dad, the high-flying corporate executive. So, instead, I emulated my dad, the guy who defines his life by "success" at work. It's not easy for me to confess this in front of all of you, because it has come at the expense of my relationships with family and friends and even myself. Don't get me wrong, I love being your senior minister, but I'm going to do some letting go of my own obsession with it. I also got in touch with my call as a husband and father, which is every bit as much ministry as what I do here on Sunday morning. So, I got the message! I'm coming down from the dizzying heights with a new commitment to balance my work and family and my own self-care. (And I'm sure I'm not alone in this type of struggle!)

So, that's my most recent treetop experience. But, we have to heed Jesus' call: "Zacchaeus, come down!" We have to get down from the tree of theory to grounded practice.

I'm going to try a three-step approach to applying my good intentions when I come down out of the tree. I think of it this way: **Learn it; Live it; Love it.** I'm starting to learn my lesson. I'm putting it into practice and living it. And I'm loving it, which will help me resist the temptation to shift back into old patterns. There's more to the story than that, of course, but I'm going to give it a try: Learn it; Live it; Love it.

What in your life do you need to shift? What relationships need more attention? What life-giving aspect of your existence has been missing? How do you want to be different as a person, as a son or daughter, as a parent, as a partner? You don't need to wait for an AFOG, you can create your own path for transformation. And then you have to come down out of your tree.

Be a people of transformation: Learn it; Live it; Love it.

I'd like to close with the Serenity Prayer, which was written by UCC theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, and has been adopted by 12-Step programs throughout the world. If you would, turn to number 852 at the back of your hymnal and join me in offering this prayer. (It's slightly different from the version used in AA and other groups.)

"God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, courage to change the things that should be changed, and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Amen."