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“Finding Something New”

Luke 19:1-10

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Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man named Zacchaeus was there, a chief tax collector who was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So, Zacchaeus ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see Jesus, who was going to pass that way.

When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today."

So, he hurried down and was happy to welcome Jesus.

All who saw it began to grumble and said, "Jesus has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."

Zacchaeus stood there and said to Jesus, "Look, half of my possessions I will give to those who are poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."

Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Sarah and Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost."

Luke 19:1-10

When I was a student in Mississippi, my school did not recognize the existence of foreign languages. My lowest grade in college was in Spanish. My lowest grade in seminary was in Greek. After five months in Chile, I could order lunch if the waitress did not ask a complicated question like "¿Grande o pequeño?"

I now have a 3,195-day streak on Duolingo—an app that promises to teach Spanish. Every day I take a

5–10-minute lesson. I repeat what a little green owl says. I answer simple questions. I fill in the blanks.

After more than eight years of Spanish lessons, I still do not understand much Spanish. The main thing I have learned is that I like trying. The owl is encouraging— “5 in a row!” Me gustan my little lessons.

When I was in the eleventh grade, I got a job as a mechanic at Sears. I worked on cars through high school and every summer during college. Mechanics begin with tires, the training wheels of automotive repair. Most quickly move up to exhausts or shock absorbers. After two years and six summers, I was still changing tires. I was given many opportunities to work on mufflers and shocks. Cars got louder and shakier when I touched them.

I worked with the best mechanics. I took notes and correspondence courses. I continued to be terrible. I worried about my customers’ safety,

but no one got hurt—except me. I am fine now.

I enjoyed changing tires. I loved taking off cheap worn-out tires

and putting on fancy Michelins that still had that new tire smell. Fonzie was a mechanic. Who would not want to be Fonzie?

Growing up in Fundamentalist Baptist churches left me without a sense of rhythm. When I try to dance, the results are disconcerting. I have stayed at the Elaine Benes level.

One dear friend asked, “Are you being funny or are you really that bad?”

In a moment of poor judgment, Carol recently agreed to take dance lessons with me at the Fred Astaire Dance

Studio on Montague. At our first lesson, we began with the foxtrot: “1, 2, 3, 4. Try to go straight;”

the rumba, “1, 2, 3, 4. It’s supposed to be a square!” and the swing, “1, 2, 3, 4. We’ll go slower next time.” I not only stepped on Carol’s feet, I stepped on the instructor’s feet while dancing with Carol.

C. S. Lewis observed, “As long as you notice, and have to count the steps, you’re not yet dancing but only learning to dance.”

We have seven more lessons and I will only be learning to dance, but it will be fun. I enjoy dancing like no one wants to watch.

The normal advice is, “Find something you’re good at and stick with it.”

This sounds reasonable, but it is bad advice. Some gave up on the piano when they realized they were not going to be Mozart, but they miss playing music. Some stopped playing chess because they watched *The Queen’s Gambit* and could not figure out what was going on, but they loved chess. Some try to forget how great they felt ice skating, because some horrible coach pointed out they do not move like Kristi Yamaguchi. We should read books that no Amazon algorithm would ever recommend for us, cook what may not be edible, and play games we are going to lose.

We let our ego get in the way. We compare ourselves with those who are better at what we do, instead of enjoying what we do. If we are going to do something, we should do it, even if we do it badly. We should play chopsticks, paint by number, and write books that will never be published.

Because some who need to have a conversation with a trans person never do. Some who need to sing do not want anyone to hear. Some who need to hold a baby are afraid the baby will cry. If we allow ourselves to be limited to things we are good at, we are going to miss a lot.

If we live within the boundaries of our own competence, our world will stay small. When we try what we cannot do, our world gets bigger.

The British philosopher Bertrand Russell writes, “Make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal, until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede, and your life becomes increasingly merged in the universal life.”

He suggests we live like a river, small and contained at first, but gradually overflowing banks, merging into the sea, losing ourselves to what is bigger.

Zacchaeus has spent his life small and contained, staying within the banks. His interests grow narrower and more self-centered. He sticks with what he is good at. He does what he does well. He does not try what he does not think he can do.

He stays within the boundaries of his own competence. He does not have conversations with people he thinks will not like him. He stays away from babies. He never sings. He does not play a musical instrument, does not paint, does not write poetry, and never dances.

He is short, so he chooses to stay away from sports and romance. He eats most meals alone. He never has anyone over to his house. The people he works with are not friends. His relatives pretend they are not related, which is fine with him.

He becomes the chief tax collector because he sticks

with what he does well. He is great at math. His teachers encourage him to be a bookkeeper or an accountant. He does not decide to be a chief tax collector. He just goes where the work takes him.

Unfortunately, chief tax collector is not so much like working for the IRS—unpopular though that may be—as it is like working as a loan shark. He is closer to a Mafia boss than a bank president, bleeding the community for protection money. Being great at numbers somehow leads Zacchaeus to shaking down poor people for as much money as he can get. Tax collectors are the most hated people in Israel. They have thrown in with the enemy. They are stealing from their own.

Tax collectors are the outcasts of the outcasts—the ones lawyers tell jokes about—but he gets to work with numbers all day and the money is so good that most days having a bad reputation seems like a fair price to pay. Zacchaeus has a great house and a maid who comes once a week. He gets a new robe every month. He has a nice office. But he knows something is not working. He feels short in more than one sense.

Then one morning, he hears a crowd on the street.

He frightens a teenager by asking, “What’s going on?”

“Jesus, the one who’s been getting all the attention, is coming to Jericho.”

Years ago, when he was an enterprising, energetic young financier

Zacchaeus could not wait to get to work, but this morning he is looking for an excuse not to go to work. Finding the big event is easy. The mob lines the road, but when the tall guys are in the front row, no one can see.

Zacchaeus spots a sycamore tree up ahead and decides it is ideal. He runs ahead of the crowd and crosses the street. He has not climbed a tree since he was twelve, and it shows. But he keeps making his way up slowly, hand over hand. It takes a while. He scratches his arms. He drops his black hat.

He is a criminal accountant shinnying up a telephone poll. Peter Dinklage should play this part. When he finally settles into an almost tolerable spot, he hopes no one will notice him up there, sweaty and out of breath. A grown man, up in a tree, straddling a limb, is not the most flattering picture.

He looks down at the crowd. Zacchaeus, more than anyone in Jericho, knows how poor they are. In Israel, there is no middle class. The rich are very rich and the poor are very poor. Zacchaeus watches the mob move closer until the center of attention is directly beneath him.

Jesus peers up through the leaves and calls his name, "Zacchaeus, hurry down."

Jesus does not need to tell Zacchaeus to hurry, because he almost falls out of the tree: "Zacchaeus, you've got dinner plans. I'm inviting myself to your house."

The crowd gasps. This is new. Jesus eating dinner with the dishonest tax collector is not on anybody's bingo card.

There are important people who were assuming that Jesus would eat with them, but Christ and the crook walk off together. Jesus welcomes himself into Zacchaeus' house like he owns the place. Zacchaeus recognizes that this moment crackles with possibility. Jesus has come to bless or overwhelm him.

Zacchaeus needs to grab this long overdue moment for all

it is worth. He needs to try something new. Zacchaeus is not a people person.

He just is not. And he is no one's philanthropist. He keeps close tabs on what he has. And he is not good at grand gestures or big announcements.

But he must do something, something he is really bad at. Uncoerced, unadmonished, unprompted, stunned and stammering apologetically, he announces with great surprise to everyone, including himself, "I'll give half my income to the poor, and the ones I've cheated"—and there are more than a few— "I'll pay back four times."

Zacchaeus knows how unpracticed he is at giving things away.

This is new. As a mathematician, he knows it does not add up, but his story would not have made it into the Bible if he had not stuck with this new thing he is bad at.

Zacchaeus' world gets bigger. He talks to people he has never spoken to. He tries to fix things. He dances poorly. He sings too loud. He writes bad poetry. He volunteers to babysit. He tries to cook. He invites people to dinner. He shares what he has.

Long after Jesus leaves Jericho, someone who has not heard Zacchaeus' story sees how much money he gives away and asks, "Do you ever think about how rich you could be? Why don't you give away less?"

Zacchaeus smiles, "Because I'm good at it."

Life is too short, the world is too big, and God's love is too great to keep doing only what we have always done. We are all short, metaphorically at least, and people are blocking our views. But God can help us see more than we have always seen, see things that are not part of

the routine, try something new, make something with the joy of a rich person who just figured out how much fun it is to give money away.

Look at the gifts that call us to make something of them. Make dinner if you never do. Make a friend. Make music. Make a plan. Make good. Make your world bigger.

Learn something you never thought you would learn. Talk to someone who is hard to talk to. Play with children. Climb a tree. Laugh loud when something is funny. Cry when it is time to cry.

Be forgiving of your own imperfections, as well as the imperfections of others. Put away your phone. Get together with friends

and potential friends. Offer big compliments, the kind that stay with a person. Read a book of poetry.

Quit doing what is not worth your time. Do something so someone else will not have to. Stop arguing. Apologize to someone, even if it was mostly their fault. Forgive someone, even if they do not deserve it.

Have patience. Stop having patience when it is time to tell the truth. Figure out what you hope for and live into that hope. Give to causes you care about.

Worship with all your heart. Love your church. Believe that God loves you. Remember the stories of Jesus. See Christ in the people around you. Share God's love with someone who has forgotten it. Delight in God's good gifts. See that life is holy.

Open your heart to the Spirit. Search for something better than your own comfort. Live in the joy beneath it all. Surround yourself not with the things at which you excel, but with what you love. Let God make your life new.