

SERMON TITLE: "The Tree of Life: God's Generous Salvation"
SERMON TEXT: Luke 19:1-10
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: October 29, 2023, at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

Today is the third Sunday that we're talking about The Tree of Life. Thanks again to Ray Christian, Peggy Carr, and Chris Hicks for giving their lay member perspectives on this theme and telling why they believe it's important to give generously to God through our Ogden First United Methodist Church. In addition to their great talks, I've already preached to you about the Tree of Life as God's precious wisdom and God's satisfying joy. Today and next week, we're going to talk about the Tree of Life as God's generous salvation and God's healing fruit.

As I made plans to preach on this theme of The Tree of Life for four Sundays, I looked up a lot of biblical references and stories about trees. While some of those scripture passages have lent themselves well to our stewardship theme, others didn't make much sense. For example, how could I inspire you all to give generously to our church's ministries by preaching on the story of Absalom, King David's very rebellious son who entered into battle against his father's royal army? Second Samuel (18:9-15) tells us that the battle took place in a forest, and Absalom's "mule went under the thick branches of a great oak" tree. I imagine that Absalom must have had long curly hair, because we're told that his head got caught in the oak tree, and the mule he had been riding continued on without him. Then one of David's soldiers thrust three spears through him, while Absalom was hanging by his hair from the oak tree.

Instead of a tree of life, that seems more like a tree of death, so I couldn't really think how that story would help us raise money for the church! In fact, that story's negative example reminded me of the saying that my dad often repeated when my brothers or I wanted something that our family couldn't afford. While we children weren't nearly as rebellious as Absalom, Dad definitely wanted to correct our wayward thinking. He wanted to make sure we knew that "Money does NOT grow on trees."

Of course, we all get the point of that little proverb. Money doesn't grow on trees. But farmers who have fruit, nut, and avocado orchards might protest that their trees do grow money. And today's scripture from the Gospel of Luke certainly does tell us a story about financial generosity that began growing in a tree. So, let's take a closer look at this Zacchaeus story, and think about how the tree of life demonstrates God's generous salvation.

1—THE STORY OF ZACCHAEUS

This story of Zacchaeus is familiar to any of us who ever participated in children's Sunday School. Maybe we remember singing the song, "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see. And when the Savior passed that way, he said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down, for I'm going to your house today. I'm going to your house today.'"

Already, in just that first part of the story, we sense the generosity of God. Even though Zacchaeus was short in stature, God had generously provided him with a tree that he could climb. Zacchaeus wasn't left in his shortcomings. Instead, God generously gave him a way that he could be lifted up in body and in spirit. Even though Zacchaeus was full-grown in stature, God provided a way for Zacchaeus to grow his heart by connecting with Jesus the Christ. Somehow, God had planted in Zacchaeus' mind a spiritual curiosity about Jesus. Within the branches of the Sycamore tree, God's generosity was sprouting and beginning to grow.

I suspect each one of us can relate to this initial generosity of God in our own lives. We wouldn't be here in worship today if some kind of spiritual interest and opportunity hadn't presented itself to us. Instead of a tall tree, maybe we had a tall grandpa or nurturing grandma who lifted us up to Jesus. Maybe our parents raised us with a spiritual vision. Maybe a preacher, Sunday School teacher, or friend drew us toward Christ. Maybe we attended a Christian school, or maybe it was reading the Bible that allowed us to see Jesus. Somehow, some way, God set a tree alongside our path, so we could climb up and begin to experience God's generous salvation.

2—JESUS TOOK INTEREST IN ZACCHAEUS

Here in Ogden, we're keenly aware that tax collectors and IRS workers aren't getting rich. We certainly don't fault them for earning a living by doing the honest nuts-and-bolts work that keeps our government funded and operating. In Bible times, however, tax collecting was a different story.

Bible scholars tell us that tax collectors like Zacchaeus became rich because they routinely charged extra. They did this so they could keep significant portions for themselves. The tax collectors were Jews who worked for the Romans. With Roman soldiers at their sides, Zacchaeus and his colleagues forcefully extracted money from their fellow Jews to finance the Roman occupation. So, not only did tax collectors take money, but they were also political traitors to the well-being and independence of their own people. It's no wonder that the gospels speak of "tax collectors and sinners" in one breath. With his Jewish neighbors, Zacchaeus would have been a very unpopular guy.

So, the generosity of God shows up in this story in the fact that Jesus took note of short Zacchaeus up in the sycamore tree. Jesus didn't ignore him, and Jesus didn't condemn him. Instead, Jesus essentially said, "Zacchaeus, I want to spend some time with you." By inviting himself to Zacchaeus' house, Jesus probably got a nice dinner and maybe a bed for the night. But Zacchaeus also got the attention and conversation of a wonderful Jewish teacher. Zacchaeus felt honored, appreciated, and valued by Jesus. Zacchaeus was no longer a lonely outcast. He was no longer the kid who sat alone in the crowded lunchroom. Everyone could see that Zacchaeus had an important friend!

God's generous salvation may begin by providing a tall tree which helps us see Jesus. But God's generous salvation also invites us into a relationship. Many of you know our church's vision statement: First United Methodist Church will meet spiritual needs by *developing relationships* with Christ, community, and the world. We experience the generosity of God's salvation through the love of Jesus which notices us and connects with us wherever and whoever we are. God's generous salvation may

help us climb a tree, but it doesn't leave us up there. God's generous salvation calls us to come down from the tree and become friends.

There's an old hymn that says, "Friendship with Jesus, fellowship divine/ O what blessed, sweet communion/ Jesus is a friend of mine."¹ The Tree of Life reminds us that, no matter how short, unpopular, or otherwise inadequate we might feel, there's no need to feel alone. Jesus wants to come to our house for a visit. He wants to share a meal with us. Through God's generous salvation in the tree of life, we realize that Jesus wants to be our friend.

3—AN OPPORTUNITY TO RESPOND

And, of course, we all know what happened when Jesus went to Zacchaeus' house. The tax collector was so happy that he responded with the generosity that Jesus had extended to him. Zacchaeus immediately repented of his sins and declared that he was going to change his ways. Because of God's generous salvation, Zacchaeus offered to give up half of all his wealth, and—if he had cheated anyone—he would pay them back four times as much. God's generous salvation of forgiveness and mercy called forth from Zacchaeus a great response of financial generosity.

Fortunately, we have a merciful and forgiving God. And just like in the story of Zacchaeus, Jesus has recently entered into our homes and created an opportunity for us to respond. Hopefully you all received a pledge card in the mail last week. If you didn't get one, or if you've misplaced it, there are some additional ones on the usher desk at the back of the sanctuary. Please take that pledge card in your hands and consider it as a symbol of Jesus there with you in your home, having a meal and a conversation with you. I encourage you to pray about what God's generous salvation means in your life and what it might mean in the lives of other people too. Then prepare your response and bring it back to church next Sunday, November 5. Let's see if we can grow in our own generosity as we consecrate our 2024 pledges for the ministries of God's generous salvation.

CONCLUSION

The generosity that comes from the tree of life reminded me of a legend of three young trees that stood together in a forest. As the three trees grew, they talked with one another about their hopes and dreams. The first tree looked up at the sparkling stars and decided it wanted to be made into a treasure chest covered with shiny gold and gems. When it came time for that tree to be cut down, however, the woodworker fashioned the tree into a feeding trough for animals instead.

The second tree dreamed of being built into a great ship, strong enough to sail on the sea. When it was cut down years later, however, that tree was used to build only a small fishing boat.

The third tree had wished that it could remain standing on top of the mountain looking high into the sky. That tree's goal was to point toward God in heaven. But one day, a logger came along and cut that third tree into thick beams and placed them in a lumberyard where they lay flat on the ground.

Sadly, the three trees accepted their fates, and, over some years, they nearly forgot their dreams . . . until, one night, a mother placed a newborn baby into the feeding trough, and the first tree knew that it held a treasure. After more years passed, the second tree—now a small fishing boat—was being tossed in a storm. But just then, an amazing passenger called out to the wind and waves, "Peace! Be still!" After some more time passed, the third tree's beams were jerked from the woodpile, and a man's hands and feet were violently nailed into it. This seemed like the absolute opposite of pointing anyone toward God in heaven. The tree felt so sad until Sunday morning, when the world became abuzz with the joy of Jesus' resurrection. The empty beams of the cross clearly pointed out that God's generous salvation was available to all the world! The tree of death had miraculously become a tree of life!

Like Zacchaeus, let's climb up in the tree of life that God has provided. Then let's climb down to be in a relationship with Jesus. And may we respond eagerly to God's generous salvation! With our spirits and our financial commitments, let's generously support the tree of life.