

October 30, Ordinary 31C (Luke 19:1-10)

You want to see and be seen by Jesus? Sinner, get ready!

by [Jessica Mesman](#) in the [October 2022](#) issue

In Catholic school, Zacchaeus was presented to me as a biblical hero, someone to emulate. I remember a religion class where I colored mimeographed pictures of him sitting in his sycamore tree. *What would I do to see Jesus?* the coloring page prompted me to wonder. Zacchaeus muscled his way to the top of a tree, and Jesus was so delighted with this effort he invited himself over for dinner.

That's how we heard it, anyway. I couldn't help but equate spiritual effort with God's favor. Here was a warning against spiritual laziness, some extra motivation to keep my butt off the pew while I knelt during mass or to stay awake while we prayed the rosary in the dim light of our classroom with some soft pan flute music playing in the background.

Later, when my dad took me to evangelical churches, the Sunday school message was similar. Zacchaeus in his tree was a warning against backsliding. Yes, he was a sinner, but at least he was ready to clamber up that tree for a mere look at Jesus. Tax collector or no, that kind of passion was proof of spiritual commitment. If we really loved Jesus, what would we do? Would I respond to the altar call? Would I get in this Jacuzzi bathtub in my gym shorts in front of the whole church and let the pastor dunk me under the water? Yes, I would. Would my dad burn his Black Sabbath records? Also yes.

I took perhaps too much delight in reading, years later, that when Jesus shows up and speaks to Zacchaeus in his tree, it is not to recognize his actions as those of a person of great faith or spiritual dedication but to tell him to come down at once. Some translations soften the delivery, but when Jesus says, "I must stay at your house today," it's a command, maybe even a vaguely threatening one, and it is delivered with a clipped urgency that makes me think Zacchaeus is in trouble. This is where the story gets good.

Zacchaeus clearly wanted to see Jesus, for whatever reason—curiosity, admiration, the status of having the best seat in the house. We don't really know his motivation, but we know that as a tax collector he is a villain in his community. The grace he encounters when he gets what he asked for is the sort of violent grace that characters in a Flannery O'Connor story experience when they get slapped in the face with the cosmic reality of who they really are. Jesus will not be satisfied to see Zacchaeus perched in the tree. Jesus will enter Zacchaeus's own house right then and there, just as Zacchaeus has probably entered the houses of so many others, and take a thorough account. Grace is as swift as it is violent. You want to see and be seen by Jesus? Sinner, get ready!

But what happens next continues to surprise me, because not only is the sinful tax collector happy to welcome Jesus into his home, but before the spiritual audit can even proceed he spontaneously declares he will give half his possessions to the poor and pay back any he's defrauded fourfold, beyond what the law requires. Zacchaeus climbs the tree as a man whose character is as stunted as his height, but when Jesus sees him he is moved not just to repentance but to joy. This is the sort of spiritual awakening that might drive one of O'Connor's characters insane. But within the space of a few sentences we witness the transformation of Zacchaeus, and Jesus declares his salvation.

Climbing the tree to see Jesus may indeed have been a form of spiritual striving. But as the 20th-century mystic Caryll Houselander observed, Jesus "prefers to be known, not by His own human features, but by the quickening of His own life in the heart, which is the response to His coming." That's a much more intimate kind of knowing. The evidence of authentic encounter is that sudden quickening in Zacchaeus's heart. Happiness and reparations seem to flow effortlessly in response.

Still, climbing a tree, praying the right prayers, doing the altar call, keeping my butt off the pew—all of that sounds a lot safer to me than letting Jesus into my most closely guarded sanctuary to see all the stuff I've been hoarding out of sight. As O'Connor knew, there is something terrifying about the prospect of being apprehended as we truly are.

But it turns out Zacchaeus is a good example after all. He shows me I don't need to fear being seen by Jesus. I might be transformed into someone I don't recognize, but my current form is the one God wants to meet and enter, right now.