

Proper 26 Year C 2016

It has been a long time since I've climbed a tree... The last time, I think, was in college, perhaps motivated by Drummond Brother's beer, \$1.99 a six pack if memory serves... I was elected to climb a raggedy oak tree to retrieve mistletoe for a fraternity Christmas party... How many frat guys does it take to get mistletoe? Seven... one to climb the tree and six to sit in the car and guard the beer! But I was a good tree climber as a boy. I remember my brothers and I built a tree house in our back yard... we scavenged wood planks from a construction site; and I climbed the tree to nail in the first few boards.... Up the tree one could see past the subdivision behind our house all the way to my grandmother's a half mile away.... Just a few feet up off the ground the perspective changes... That tree house for years was a place to which we could escape our mundane earthly lives. It was a fortress sometimes into which we could take refuge from wild Indians... or the Yankees... we played Swiss Family Robinson with our friends from the neighborhood... Sometimes in our imaginations it was a ship that would take us to distant, exotic lands.... Being just a few feet off of the ground our perspectives were heightened... We could see things differently... being there among the limbs the world was brighter, and we seemed to have some mastery of it.

Much later in college at Sewanee I was invited to the home of Dr. Edward McCrady, the former Vice-Chancellor of the University and biology professor extraordinaire... His grandchildren were classmates of mine, and they and several of us who were their friends were invited to his home on the bluff of the mountain for supper... as the sun was setting, Dr. McCrady, the consummate scientist, gave us an impromptu lecture on perspective... I'm sure I don't have the formula right, but it was something like this: that for every foot of elevation, one can see a thousand feet into the distance... so that just a slight degree of height, gives rise to a vast field of vision.... We all looked west towards the reddening evening sky... miles towards the horizon... from this perspective we could see farmland stretched out in gentle tableau... we could see the early evening lights of the town of Cowan ten miles west of the mountain we were on... smoke rising from anonymous hearths... the world entire before our eyes and the lives in it ending a day.

Our story today in Luke is a story about perspective... and how perspective leads to conversion.... Conversion meaning to turn from what we once perceived as reality to a new vision of the world... the people who follow Jesus in the gospels don't do so until they experience conversion... none of us do anything until we are converted.... Not some ecstatic mystical experience necessarily

9though that happens for some), but a moment of perspective that changes everything.

Luke is at his literary best in this story. In just a few lines he conjures up this image of Zacchaeus, the chief tax collector, short of stature he says.... You know the rogue, the untouchable, the one making a living off of the poor... the snitch, calculating entrepreneur in cahoots with the Roman overlords... We have seen the tax collector just recently in this gospel For Jesus the tax collector represents one of the outcasts, one of the unredeemable... and here he is again, just in case we might miss the point... God is not looking for people who have kept all the rules, the right sort of people, polite company to join in the movement of bringing about God's reign... God is looking for people who God can use... and the people God can use are the people who have had a crisis of perspective... people who are paying close enough attention to their world; people who are open enough to see things differently... to see things perhaps with God's eyes, a vast new perspective.

Many scholars make this story about Jesus... that he is the hero... that he notices Zacchaeus's interest in his passing through town, and deigns to invite himself to dinner... repent and the Lord will come into your home and into your

heart; that's how the popular theology goes... But I am intrigued with what must have been going through the mind of Zacchaeus... The scene is full of energy... the excited crowd, the anticipation.... Jesus and his entourage have come into town... word must have spread about this charismatic teacher and preacher... so much so that there is a large boisterous crowd pressing in on him... so large that Zacchaeus must climb a tree to get a glimpse of this man whose reputation precedes him.... This one who has healed sick people... this one who has raised the dead, people say.... The air is electric, and Zacchaeus looks upon the scene with a heightened perspective... I'm guessing that he gets not only a bird's eye view of Jesus and his disciples, but a wider view of the people coming out to see him... people wanting to touch his garment... I imagine he sees sick people, people who are blind, lame and hungry people, people bringing their loved ones in need... he sees the energy driving them... he sees desperation and he sees hope... he sees people moved by their faith.... He sees the world as it is, and the possibilities in it... A vast new field of vision.... What he sees is reality, and that reality is irresistible... He sees his true self... his true calling... From his vantage point he sees the need of his world... and he sees that there are people in this world who are willing to give their lives to this need... and he is converted.... Converted by this vision of the Good that Jesus and his followers represent.

I have told you before that a chief theme in Luke is the power of prayer... Prayer that brings perspective... prayer that gives us vision... prayer that moves us to act... prayer is about raising our consciousness to see the world with a new perspective... In other words, to be mindful.... Which is to open ourselves to the world, the true vision of it... and to be transformed to be a person that God can use.... Prayer is about conversion... Life, in truth is a journey of one conversion after the next... a journey of living freely into the change that comes upon us...The sages call this maturing in the faith... Living a life open to new perspective, new awareness, new meaning, new purpose... We of course have the power to block the conversions into which we are called... we retreat into our comfort zones... we have many distractions.... But we are called brothers and sisters to pay rapt attention to what God is doing in the world, and to what God would have us do in it. Prayer is the predisposition of the people of faith... It is all about listening. It is about empathy. It is about learning. It is about humility. It is about courage... Unless we are open to the process of conversion, then we are a part of the broken perspective that blocks the Spirit that renews and restores and recovers...

So I bid you this day, this day of infinite possibility... I bid you this day to be open to what God is doing in the world around us... Be open to new perspective,

new ideas... hold lightly what you've always known... Look to where the energy of
new life is... and follow where it leads.... Even if it means climbing a tree.