

## *What Happens When You Aren't in the Story?*

Matthew 14:19-21, Luke 19:1-10

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La Verne Church of the Brethren

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When I was a little girl growing up in Kansas, I imagined myself in the stories I read, watched or were read to me. I was the youngest child of a loving family. I had age-appropriate chores, as did all members of my family. But when my Dad would read the story of Cinderella to me at night, I was Cinderella, even though there wasn't anything in my life that looked like her life.

When I was in elementary school I loved, loved, loved the show H.R. Pufnstuf. If you have never heard of it, it was a life-size puppet show and H. R. Pufnstuf was a puppet dragon and mayor of Living Island. Jimmy was a young boy who was lured to the island by an enchanted boat so that Witchiepoo could steal Jimmy's magic talking flute. Please don't tease me forever now that I have admitted this to you. My brother still teases me. In fact, not that long ago he gave me a DVD of old H.R. Pufnstuf episodes. I was obsessed. I had a 45 of music from the show. I found a cane and hat and I would spend hours a day creating dances to H.R. Pufnstuf, as if I was a little boy named Jimmy who had a magic-talking flute.

When I would go to Sunday School and hear the stories from the Bible, the teacher would encourage us to find ourselves in these stories. I wanted to be the Good Samaritan, Martha's sister Mary and the beloved disciple.

We find ourselves in the stories we read, watch and hear. It doesn't matter if their lives and our lives have anything in common. We are usually the hero or heroine. We rarely identify with Judas, Darth Vader or the Wicked Witch of the West. We might see ourselves as the victim, but we are rarely the oppressor. We are Anne Frank, hiding in a small room concealed behind a bookcase, not the Nazi soldiers uncovering our secret place.

I remember in high school when I was in a Bible Study led by the youth pastor of my home church. We were reading through the story of the Feeding of the 5,000 from the Gospel of Matthew and we got to the final verse of that story. Analise read it to us this morning. *And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.* Another way of saying this is: "We counted the men, but we didn't bother counting the women or children." "Why were the women not counted?" I asked the Bible Study teacher, a young hip white man who was the definition of misogynistic before I had even heard of the word. He explained very slowly to us that God had ordained that men were the head of households and therefore worthy of being counted. Suddenly, I felt left out of the story in a way I had never experienced before. I was shuttled off to the side of the hill while Jesus fed a multitude of men with a little bit of food from a child's basket...from a child who shared his food but wasn't worthy of being

counted. Suddenly, the carpet was pulled out from underneath my feet. I now had to enter into every Bible story and ask myself, “Am I allowed in this story? Will I count here?”

Those are the questions that Zaccheus was asking himself when he heard that the young prophet was coming through his town of Jericho. Zaccheus was not just a tax collector but a chief tax collector. Rome levied heavy taxes and the Empire found it advantageous to use locals to collect those taxes. Zaccheus was working for the Roman occupation, a traitor to his own people. Tax collectors got a percentage of what they collected plus many of them overcharged, and the Romans allowed these tax collectors to keep what they had skimmed.

Zaccheus was hated...reviled by his neighbors. We are also told that he was short of stature. So, when he came to the town square to get a good look at Jesus, his neighbors didn't say, “Hey, Zaccheus, come stand in the front where you can see. They didn't feel that the commandment to love your neighbor as you love yourself included the likes of Zaccheus. Have you ever noticed that when the tall ones are in front, everyone is too short?”

Many, many people over the years have been told that they aren't in the story or if they are there they aren't counted. It is the reason we have Black History Month, followed by Women's History Month. It isn't that there isn't a long rich courageous story to be told of Black history in the United States. It is because those who wrote the historical narrative left them out. It isn't that there weren't women on the hillside the day Jesus fed the multitudes, they just weren't counted. The tall ones up front block the view.

Zaccheus wasn't willing to miss Jesus, thought. Zaccheus knew he wasn't going to get to see the prophet by staying put so he improvised. He figured out Jesus' route and then ran ahead and climbed a tree so he could get a good look at the man about whom everyone was talking. Zaccheus knew he was on the periphery of this story but at least the tall ones couldn't block his view if he climbed a tree.

When Jesus walked past that particular tree he looked up and saw Zaccheus perched there. What made Jesus look up at that particular moment? The Gospel of Luke has told us that by the time Jesus was walking through Jericho that day he had already set his face towards Jerusalem. What does that mean...he set his face towards Jerusalem? Was it that he was excited because he wanted to hurry and get to the holy city to celebrate Passover? No. He has told his disciples that a prophet shouldn't die away from Jerusalem. Jesus had set us face towards his own death...and Jericho happened to be a city in his path between here and there. Imagine, if you will, what would have been going on in your head if you were on a journey that led to your martyrdom. What would you be thinking? Would you notice the chief tax collector perched in a tree if you had your eyes set on death?

What made Jesus look up? If I crawl inside this story, I think it was because people were pointing at Zaccheus and snickering. But Jesus didn't laugh. He looked up to the

man on the edge of the story and invited him into the middle of the story. Jesus invited himself to Zaccheus' house for dinner. "What? Me? Are you talking to me?" Zaccheus said. He had just hoped to see Jesus as he passed through Jericho...to get a glimpse of the story from the margins. But instead, Zaccheus became the story. He was invited to dinner in his own home with Jesus as the host. Zaccheus was as amazed as the crowd who thought they were the ones in the center of the story. Zaccheus scrambled down out the tree in absolute joy.

But the tall ones standing around Jesus were incensed. "Really? We lined up to welcome this prophet, who ignored us in favor of Zaccheus. Jesus has chosen to eat with Zaccheus, the sinner, over us." Zaccheus, with absolute delight on his face, said, "I am giving half of my goods away. If I cheated anyone, I am making reparations of four times what I took." He couldn't wait to make it right.

A couple weeks ago, Dr. Mitzi Smith spoke to us about the politics of salvation. Jesus speaks to that issue again. "Zaccheus is a son of Abraham," he says. "You might not have noticed that with the tall ones blocking the view and through your righteous anger. You need to know that salvation came to this house today...the one you made climb a tree to be able to see."

Jesus is always walking through the cities we live in. Jesus is always moving between the lines we create. Jesus is always paying attention to those on the edge of the story. Jesus is always noticing those whose view is blocked by the tall ones standing in front.

This story has something important to say to those who can't find themselves in the grand story of God because they have been told they don't count...because the story has been skewed by racism, sexism, prejudice, self-righteousness or homophobia.... Because the way the story is interpreted has twisted who Jesus is. This story speaks to those whose view has been blocked. You are definitely in this story. Don't let anyone tell you differently. Jesus sees you. He finds you on the edges and invites you to be a main character in your own life, in your own community and in God's story of redemptive love. This story invites you to be a tree climber. Be Zaccheus, who was merely hoping for a glimpse of this young and fearless prophet walking through his hometown and instead, found out what it meant to have Jesus in the center of his life.

This story also has something to say to the tall ones in the front. You can't block the love of God. Jesus had a thing for the tax collector, the outsider, the dismissed, the marginalized. You might fail to see past the culture that formed you, but Jesus is always making a way...looking up and out and around to those on the edges. That is the real story of this whole book. That is the central message of the Gospel. If you don't think everyone is in this story, you have missed the point.

I invite you to climb into this story and look around. Who are you? Once you have figured that out, ask yourself what it is you need to do to make things right.  
Amen.