BUFFALO
UNITED METHODIST

9.7.25 Called by Love

I've been wanting to try this new thing of pausing to pray before preaching. Try it out for September, see how it goes.

So, allow me to pray for this time together in God's Presence.

Loving God, as we lift our eyes to You and open our hearts to Your Word today, help us to apply Your truth in our daily lives.

May each of us receive Your grace upon grace, and hear You lovingly calling us by name in a new way. By Your grace, help us respond to Your invitation into deeper friendship with You, and gently aid us in being open to the joyful transformation Your grace brings—like Zacchaeus, whose heart overflowed with generosity when he encountered Your love, grace, and acceptance. Amen.

Okay…whenever I hear the name *Zacchaeus*, I can't help but think of that little Sunday School song: ***"Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee little man was he…"***

That's all I knew about him—that he was short and that he climbed a tree. And that just gets tune gets stuck in my head.

But there is so much more here to see! And if we only keep Zacchaeus locked in that Sunday School song, I am afraid we'll miss the rich depth of grace found in his story. Let's try to move past our Sunday School framing and hear his encounter with grace with new ears.

Because Zacchaeus wasn't just short—he was shunned. As a tax collector he was collaborating with the Roman occupiers, growing wealthy off the sweat and labor of his own people.

He had turned his back on them, and in return they literally turned their backs on him, forcing that tree climbing. They despised him. He lived disconnected, isolated, and rejected.

Maybe we've felt like Zacchaeus at times in our own lives. If not necessarily short in stature, maybe short in other ways. Short on acceptance, short on courage, short on connection. Short on whatever it feels like everyone else seems to have plenty of.

Have you ever felt short on acceptance and belonging, like you were on the outside looking in? A new student in a school where everyone else already has their circle of friends and knows everyone's name? A new hire in a workplace where the culture seems foreign?

Maybe you've been painfully aware of where you don't measure up, or found yourself hiding parts of who you are, feeling like you were getting the cold shoulder, maybe even feeling far from God?

Those are some pretty heavy feelings. And into that heaviness—into Zacchaeus' isolation and our own places of "coming up short"— we are reminded this morning, Jesus shows up with abundant, life-changing grace, without fail.

I remember a time when I felt like I was on the outside—painfully aware of what I lacked compared to others.

It was in 2018, when I first came into the United Methodist denomination and when I first began pastoring. That year was full of firsts.

At my very first Annual Conference, I didn't know a soul. I spent a lot of time repeating my name and explaining how I had come over from another denomination. And all the while I anxiously wondered—***how will I be received?***

But the warmth and graciousness of those pastors was truly amazing! They made sure I felt known, welcomed, and they even invited me to lunch!

So, when I look back on those early years of becoming a United Methodist pastor, I can only say with awe: ***What a marvelous thing God has done for me! By God's grace, I've been grafted in. But why me?***

Today we begin a new sermon series called *Transformed by Grace*. Week by week, we'll see how encounters with the grace of God changes us—turning hiding and isolation into connection, shame into joy, selfishness into generosity.

And who better to begin with than Zacchaeus—a man whose life was turned upside down when grace worked so hard to find him, not in a synagogue or in prayer, but up in a sycamore – fig tree.

Zacchaeus learned that when grace is present and active, it means that just as much as he might have been working hard to see Jesus, Jesus had been working even harder to find Zaccaeus.

In just ten short verses, Luke gives us a sizable amount about this little man from Jericho.

Luke begins with a simple detail in our first verse, ***"Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through."***

So, we know Jericho wasn't Jesus' destination. And later in this chapter, we see Jerusalem was his goal. The cross was waiting for Jesus.

But still, Jesus was present there on purpose. It wasn't a mistake. Luke describes Jesus' mission of grace plainly, at the end, in verse 10, ***"For the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost."***

And so, this meeting with Zacchaeus wasn't an accident. It was a planned encounter of lavish and individual grace—because the Lord is seeking out not just the lost in general, but Zacchaeus in particular.

Next, Luke introduces us to Zacchaeus. And immediately we see he is not the kind of person people went out of their way to visit, but rather went out of their way to avoid.

Though Jewish by birth, Zacchaeus worked as a tax collector—a **chief** tax collector. He was a public figure, well-known like Jesus.

But his job meant he was seen as a traitor to his people, working for the Romans. He got rich by taking advantage of his neighbors. To his community, he was both a sellout and a cheat.

Zacchaeus was not the kind of person anyone would have ever thought deserved the honor of meeting Jesus.

And yet—Jesus is always welcoming the wrong people, right? Always crossing the boundaries of respectability. He talked to women, visited with beggars, ate with sinners, hugged the unclean, simple confounding the self-righteous.

Because grace, after all, is undeserved. It's not earned. It's not based on our good behavior. It is freely given. Grace is God's unearned favor poured extravagantly into our lives.

Then comes the moment when grace gets personal. ***"When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said, 'Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.'"***

Do you notice? Jesus calls him by name. He doesn't say, "Hey you in the tree!" He says, "Zacchaeus." Our names are music to our ears.

Jesus doesn't need name tags. The Lord knows our names and knows how many hairs we have on our heads. Grace is not generic—it's personal.

And speaking of names, Zacchaeus is the only Zacchaeus in the whole Bible. There are a few Josephs and Johns and James. But only one Zaccheaus. His name's meaning is a bit ironic, meaning "innocent" or "clean". He was one of a kind.

But speaking of names, I remember when I was the only Amy here. But last week, Amy Austin reminded me that we needed to clear up the confusion of having similar names.

So please, call me **Pastor Amy** and call her **Amy**. Otherwise, our heads might snap off from swinging around every time we think someone's calling us!

But this is also evidence of grace? God's grace to provide us a NEW staff member. And grace also calls us personally. Grace says, "Zacchaeus." It says, "Mike," "Sarah," "Barb or Barbara," and "Susan." God has a way of calling out to us, in such a way, that we KNOW when God is speaking and calling out to us personally.

Grace knows your name.

Of course, the crowd didn't like it. When Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus's home, they grumbled: ***"He has gone to be the guest of a sinner."***

And Zacchaeus heard that demeaning label. He knew what people thought of him. He had lived with their rejection for years. But something about being seen, called, and welcomed by Jesus cracked open his heart.

He jumped to his feet and said, ***"Look, Lord! Here and now I give half my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody, I will pay back four times the amount."***

Notice he doesn't give grudgingly. Grace filled him with such joy that he couldn't help but overflow into generosity.

Think of it! The man who had taken so much suddenly gave so much back. The one everyone avoided became the one Jesus befriended. The cheater became generous.

This is what grace does—it transforms us from outsiders into family, from takers into givers, from glum and isolated into joyfully connected. That's what grace looks like. It turns rejection into belonging.

Zacchaeus had been on the outside. But Jesus put right him right back dab into the middle of his faith community.  Grace fills the heart with joy. It prompts repentance. It overflows into generosity.

Friends, Zacchaeus's story is our story. Grace seeks us out. Grace calls us by name. Grace transforms our hearts leading to joy and generosity, away from isolation and into community.

So, let me ask you where do you feel like Zacchaeus, rejected or undeserving? Do you feel a bit nervous about meeting people in this congregation.

Not sure how you'll be received? Wondering if you'll fit in at an event, or worried that you don't know the same Bible stories others seem to know?

Some of us may even feel hesitant about letting God into the fullness of our lives—like Zacchaeus, hoping to catch a glimpse of Jesus without being seen ourselves.

I ask because this is a caring church, warm and welcoming.

And I ask because Jesus is still passing through.

The Lord is still stopping, still calling, still seeking and saving. And he knows your name.

Zacchaeus's story reminds us: Jesus *seeks us*, *sees* us. Jesus *calls* us by name. Grace pulls us from the periphery and places us at the very center of God's Forever Family.

And this is a two-way street. For those of us who have been here longer, Jesus is calling us, too. To see those who feel unseen. To learn the names of new disciples. To welcome people as Christ has welcomed us, and enfold them into the life of this church.

As we close, can you imagine what the church would look like if there were no outsiders? No need for name tags. If we all saw ourselves as God sees us—and if we looked at others through that same lens?

We already catch glimpses of this. We lean into it in beautiful ways with our potlucks, when joy, generosity, and love overflow, and we celebrate together as one family.

And in just a few moments, we'll gather at the Lord's Table—our meal of grace. Here, Jesus shows us once more that no one is an outsider in his eyes. All are welcomed, all are fed, all are embraced as God's beloved children.

This is what happens when we follow Zacchaeus' example—when we move from being agents of ourselves to becoming agents of grace.

So, let me leave you with this: Where do you already see people living this way—welcoming, embracing, bringing outsiders in? And where might God be inviting you to do the same?

**Time of Reflection:**

1. Where in your life do you feel "up in a tree"—longing to see Jesus but hesitant to be seen by Him? How might grace be calling you down today into joy, service or generosity?
2. Who around you might feel like an outsider, unseen, or on the margins—and how is Jesus inviting you to extend welcome and grace to them?