My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our minds, hearts, bodies, and spirits, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Our story is a visual feast for the eyes and ears, isn’t it? And for those of us who have been going to church for a while, this story is one of the basics, and when we go to other parts of the Christian world it’s not unusual to see it in paintings or in mosaic on the cupola of a basilica, right? That’s because this story is full of images: short versus tall, good versus corrupt, sinner versus….well, those who don’t think they sin all that much (which sounds kind of like us right here, hmmm?).

But let’s skip past the obvious metaphors here and go a little deeper, just like we did with our Neighbors series…we learned something there in those 5 weeks from September to October didn’t we? (take all answers). OK, Sure, we learned about how in need the world is if we only look around, but what did we learn about OURSELVES? Uh oh. That’s a tougher question.

We heard from 119 Connections about the apartment fires, remember that? We learned from this core team from Townsend Emergency Management Agency (TEMA) that they took on the hard work of deploying their resources, solved technical problems of people suddenly homeless, and met basic needs of food, housing, and clothing. But also needed and in the undercurrent of all of this is moral health of a community’s response and recognition of need, and they came here to appeal to us for help going forward. TEMA and area first responders, which includes the churches of Townsend, formed this group to see how we can better help the ongoing and real needs of people, right here, right now, to avert a crisis of food scarcity, homelessness, domestic abuse, or child endangerment.

The key for them is knowing people around town as more than ‘those folks in the apartments’. It requires active engagement, sometimes in situations that we know little about. But we are the church, after all, and we commit to love our neighbor in need just as we hope that we would be loved if we WERE that neighbor in need. That’s the God zone of John 13:34.

So let’s keep that in mind as we return to our story of Zaccheus. In those days, tax collectors were thought of as a special class of sinner by the Jews of Jesus’ days, because they were town folks who got rich by taking a part of any taxes they collected, and tax collectors did this by sending troops to invade homes of their fellow townspeople to find unreported goods they could tax. It was the one metric by which they were measured. It was the one metric by which they held power and wealth. It was the one metric by which they came to be resented.

Zacchaeus is pretty well-to-do by virtue of what he does, but that doesn’t really tell us much about who he is. But back then, just like now, we tend to do measure people by what they do, right? Do we think any better of tax collectors today? A 2019 survey shows 42% of people like their in-laws more than the IRS. 21% like spiders and snakes better than the IRS, 20% like cold showers more than the IRS, and 17% like traffic jams more than tax collectors. We still don’t like even the concept of tax collectors. It’s a funny thing, this Bible of ours, isn’t it, showing us that even thousands of years later, the Bible still calls us out even to our modern ears.

Now this background is important not because we’re trying to figure out how to pit one character against the other in this story. Jesus really doesn’t play the blame game in his parables and lessons. But what Jesus does is he holds a mirror up to each character in the story and then shines it on his hearers, each of us. Who are we in this parable of healing and teaching, of Luke’s Gospel?

We remember Jesus ministering to poor and sick folk mostly, don’t we? The ones who are ignored, held in low esteem by those around them, and in need of spiritual and emotional healing in order to be able to move forward in their lives. Does this fit the mold for this fella, this rich tax collector?

Let’s take a look. The assumption is Zacchaeus treats a person of Jericho like an object to be raided when he wants a new luxury rather than a person to be pitied and pardoned when they couldn’t pay. Is he held in low esteem by those around him? Does he garner respect from anyone based on anything other than tax receipts? (take all answers).

Zacchaeus has probably heard about Jesus, this one who says really wise things and cleanses lepers, drives out demons, and feeds 5,000 from nothing. Why do we go see people today…I’m not talking rock concerts, but people who come and we are made known they’re here and we go and see them? Because there’s something we are hoping to glean from them; not just information, but we’re seeking insight from them into why things are the way they are. Insight about people….actually, insight about us so that we can live better, right? Some might call that seeking in need of healing? (Yes.)

Zacchaeus also felt that he could not turn to others, because of this distance he has based on their perceptions of him, so he climbs a tree to get a glimpse; if he were in the crowd, he might just get roughed up pretty good, right?

So Zacchaeus raises himself up above the others, just like he does every day as a tax collector, to see this Jesus coming through Jericho. And notice the first thing Jesus does is command him down from the tree. Jesus doesn’t want the ones who are high up. He wants ones who are more humble and low, not the rich and high and haughty who think they’re above everyone else. Tellingly, Zacchaeus comes down right away having seen God, been called out by God, and exposed by God for his deeds to date and his character for what it is. Self-centered. Hurting. Sorry. Wondering how to get off the hamster wheel of isolation and how to make life different. And what happens? Only when we turn to God do things change. Only then does healing come. Only when we promise to change how we behave and act do we receive the fullness of the Peace of Christ, for it is in both the thinking, saying, AND the doing for others that is the full measure of the Kingdom of God.

In our minds’ eye and the epilogue to this story, Zacchaeus repents, repays, and rejoins the community. Now here’s the hard part, where we hold up the mirror. Who are we in this story? We can’t be Jesus. Uh Oh.

Are we Zacchaeus? Given riches but with a heart of stone? That’s…that can’t be right. We do our part. We give enough. And we are satisfied. Or do we need to take a fresh perspective to regain our heart of flesh?

We are not all that good at seeing ourselves in Jesus’ stories. We are not all that good at seeing ourselves in need of being laid low to do God’s work. We are not all that good at seeing ourselves to be put on the same level as every other Townsenite without health, wealth, or healing, in order to even see what’s going on. We are the chosen frozen, are we not?

Here’s our challenge as we begin another year’s pledges and promises for our time, talent, and treasure.

Will we remain frozen in place, not seeing the ministry of this church or what we are called to do as a community of faith, supporting our ministries with all that we have and all that we are, waiting on others to make us react? Does Jesus call us to be reactive or proactive? How can we better integrate with the mission of our fellow churches and 119 connections to make it even possible to see our neighbors, much less their need? Have we learned nothing from that sermon series, and refusing to change our ways of giving our time, talent and treasure, to continue to do the things we’ve always done in the way we love to do them?

Or have we learned too well to be Zacchaeus, high in the tree, isolated but looking down while God passes by, calling us out, yet afraid to get down and change our ways?

By the way, do you know what the name Zacchaeus means? It means “Pure of heart”. Now who do you want to be?

Thanks be to God, Amen.