

Far Sighted - Luke 19:1-10

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I have worn eyeglasses since the time I was five or six years old.

Over my lifetime, I've had all styles of glasses. My first-grade picture shows this bald-headed kid (actually with lots of hair believe it or not), wearing a stunningly hip orange and yellow striped shirt, and adorned with a very business-like pair of black, horned-rim glasses.

Now, black, horned-rim glasses are not in and of themselves uncool. But, when you're in the first grade and wanting to make friends with all of your classmates—boys and girls alike—anything black and horned-rim just wasn't going to get it done. Every time I see that picture now I wonder what in the world my mother was thinking when she dressed me in those spectacles.

She'd probably say that's all that was available in 1975. Fair.

As the years went by, the styles of glasses did change. I matured into the brown and more oval-shaped glasses during my upper elementary and junior high years. Then, high school came in the mid 80s.

It was during the eighties and early 90s that the big glasses craze was still very popular. You didn't have the right glasses if they didn't cover not only your eyes but your cheeks and half your forehead as well.

Old men were still wearing those big glasses long after, and David Letterman actually did a bit on his show titled,

“What’s up with old guys and their giant glasses?!” The photos were cartoonish.

(By the way, you’ve seen what’s back in style for women at least? Big glasses.)

The style I had I thought gave me the intellectual look. I fooled nobody.

After I graduated from college, I downsized into something more efficient and a bit more glitzy. I went from plastic to gold metal frames. I was, after all, a college graduate, ready for the real world and, therefore, ready for a new me. These glasses lasted me all through my first career, through seminary, and through the first year or so of my ministry.

The point of all this is not to point out stylistic trends in the eyewear industry over the last fifty years. It’s a long and convoluted way of telling you that my vision almost from the time of my birth has been imperfect. It is impaired and it keeps me and has kept me from seeing clearly for a long time.

There’s something striking about Jesus in this story from Luke today that says something about his vision. He was surrounded by a crowd of people when he entered the city of Jericho. They no doubt captured his attention quickly. A crowd of people will tend to do that. They dominated his view of the setting in which he found himself.

This crowd was full of people whom Jesus was happy to “see.” They no doubt were the ones who had been in awe of him and who were eager to hear him and to follow him and to lead the lives he was calling them to lead. They were probably the faithful, the ones to whom Jesus preached and

to whom he granted his blessing for their faithful discipleship.

But, Jesus' vision was not obscured by the up-close crowd of the faithful. We read in this story that Jesus was not only near-sighted but far-sighted as well. His vision captured the far-ranging landscape. Not only was he mindful of who was right in front of him, he was also aware of who was far off in the distance hiding in relative obscurity.

Beyond the crowd, he was able to see a man named Zacchaeus, a tax collector whom the citizenry didn't have much regard for. He would have been easy to miss, high up amidst the branches of that sycamore tree. But, for whatever reason, Jesus' vision was very keen on this particular day.

This is one of the grand stories of scripture, the story of Zacchaeus. We actually have a song about it we learned as kids:

"Zacchaeus was a wee little man and a wee little man was he, he climbed up in a sycamore tree, the Saviour for to see. And as the Saviour passed that way he looked up in the tree, and he said, "Zacchaeus, you come down, for I'm going to your house today, for I'm going to your house today."

He wants to stay at his home, to share a meal with him, and to treat him with the same compassion and care that anybody in that crowd would have merited.

One of Jesus' most unique and outstanding traits was his ability to see not only the needs and concerns of those who were eager to follow him, but the same needs and concerns of those who didn't know him or did know him but had wandered away.

Jesus' ability to see the poor is widely-known when reading the gospels. But, in this story today, he sees a tax collector, too. Three things about Zacchaeus:

First, he is not just a tax collector but a chief tax collector. He is part of the imperial administrative chain that represents the power of Rome to control the livelihoods of the locals of Jericho. Second, he is rich. Luke's narrative has already cast doubt on the faithfulness of the wealthy. The assumption was that tax collectors only attained wealth by abusing their neighbors. And thirdly, Zacchaeus was short in stature. And ancient ideas about those short in stature would have brought ridicule and exclusion.

And so, Zacchaeus is depicted as a pathetic, even despicable character.

And Jesus still picked him out from that tree and wanted to spend time with him.

Personally and collectively, there have been times when we have been just like Zacchaeus—wondering who Jesus is, struggling to get a view of him from far away, and questioning whether he can see us amidst our own struggles and our own sense of being an outsider.

The attention he paid to this rich tax collector, derided in the eyes of many for the choices he's made and the lifestyle he has led, should only bolster our hope that Jesus can see us and everyone—when we have drifted, when we have doubted, and when we have suffered. And he is there, shouting our names like he did Zacchaeus' and beckoning us to let him be a guest in our lives.

Just like Jesus has 20/20 vision when it comes to all of his children, he calls us to expand our vision so that we see not only what is going on right in front of us but also so we can see the not so obvious that might be hidden in the background.

I'm working with a small church in our presbytery that's going through a pastoral transition right now, and I moderated their Session meeting on Thursday night. And for a small church, they're pretty committed to mission and outreach.

They have what they call a "blessing box" outside on their church property, a receptacle that people can put food in for those in need. And needy folks can drive up and take something out of the blessing box.

As we would have here or as any congregation would have, an elder on Session expressed concern that people had been stealing out of the box and taking food for the wrong reasons (This elder lives within a block from the church and has a direct line of sight to the folks who drive up to the box and help themselves.)

And the others around the table acknowledged this risk—the risk that good gestures of giving might get hijacked at times by others wanting to take advantage of their generosity.

And yet, they also were willing to see beyond what was right in front of them—an occasional looting of the box. They were able to see the possibility that somebody out of their line of sight would still benefit from it despite its risk.

They all, including the elder who was concerned, were far sighted about who Jesus and who they see.

We are called to look beyond the obvious, beyond what seems to be a good solution to a problem right in front of us, and to see the entire picture.

We are called to see the Zaccheaus' of the world too. And we are called to look after them, just as Jesus looked after Zaccheaus by giving him his attention and showing him compassion.

Jesus' vision is 20/20. He sees us all, no matter if we are right in front of him or far away. By the grace of God, we too are the Zaccheaus' of the world. When we are distant, skeptical, or isolated, God will see us and come to greet us. May our vision of God's kingdom be as broad and sharp as his.