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What if Jesus was running for president?

That's a little bit what this story reminds me of:

the crowds,  
the speeches,  
kissing babies,  
and all the rest.

Jesus was out there,  
trying to spread the message,  
hoping people would buy into it,  
hoping to win hearts and minds.

And the people came out to hear him.

Even when he wanted a little time away,  
it seemed like the people would always find him.

Perhaps it is more unsavory than ever,  
but celebrity culture is not an invention of the 21st century.  
Here was a Jew  
wandering the dusty trails of 1st century Palestine,  
and the crowds are so thick,  
that not everybody can find their way in.

Zacchaeus was just trying to get a glimpse of Jesus:  
didn't need a healing,  
didn't want to test Jesus,  
didn't want anything  
but just a way to see the great man.

And even that was too much to ask.

Things weren't easy for Zacchaeus,  
because he was short in stature.  
Things weren't easy for the little man.  
And he didn't make things easy on himself.

After all,  
he was a tax collector,  
a sinner of the worst sort.

Now, it's easy to make jokes about the tax man,  
even in 21st century America.  
But the troubles we might have with the IRS  
pale next to the way things worked back then.

A tax collector was a little more like the Sheriff of Nottingham  
than a low level government employee.

Remember the mean old wolf in Disney's Robin Hood?  
How he went in  
and poured the money out of Friar Tuck's Poor Box?

When the Bible says that Jesus ate with tax collectors and prostitutes,  
you have to wonder which one was more of scandal.

I just wonder,  
who would be a friend to the tax collector?!

After all, he's the worst kind of sinner:  
he steals your money,  
he's unfair,  
AND he works for the oppressive foreign empire.

And so what could make Jesus say this,  
"Zacchaeus,  
hurry and come down;  
for I must stay at your house today."

I MUST.  
I don't have a choice;  
if I'm going to preach the love of God,  
if I'm going to heal the sick,  
if I'm going to be any kind of Messiah,  
then I MUST be with you!

The Pharisees were horrified.

And why not?

"He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner."  
He has gone to be the guest of one who steals our money,  
one who colludes with our enemies,  
one who doesn't even know what it means to love God.

It's one thing to reach out to the poor,  
or to welcome the repentant sinner.  
But Jesus is on to something else entirely.

Zacchaeus is just curious.  
He's still a tax collector;  
he's still the enemy.

“Hurry and come down;  
for I must stay at your house today.”

There's a funny turn in the text;  
it even shows up a little bit in English,  
if you pay close attention.

“He was trying to see who Jesus was,  
but on account of the crowd he could not,  
because he was short in stature.”

Who was short in stature?  
Conventional wisdom  
and children's Sunday school songs will tell us  
that it is Zacchaeus,  
a wee little man was he.

And so he scrambles up a tree,  
because he can't see over the top of the crowds.  
But it could be Jesus,  
so short,  
there in the middle of the crowd  
that Zacchaeus,  
always on the edge of things,  
cannot see Jesus.

What if Jesus was about five foot tall?  
What if Jesus wasn't handsome  
or even very healthy?

I don't think too much about what Jesus looks like;  
I don't guess it ever mattered to me.  
But I do laugh when I see images of Jesus,  
blonde haired and blue eyed.

We all have to be careful though,  
that Jesus doesn't wind up looking too much like us.  
That we don't make Jesus in our own image,  
or maybe worse,  
make God in our own image.  
That God looks like us,  
votes like us,  
loves like us.

We sure don't want to wind up like those Pharisees do we?  
They couldn't imagine a Messiah like Jesus.  
They loved all the miracles,  
all the healing.  
But they couldn't stand all that other stuff.

But it seems like the other stuff,  
the loving,  
the eating with sinners,  
the stories about God  
that will make your hair stand on end,  
seems like all that stuff is what mattered to Jesus.

Could be that was why they needed to kill him.  
Too many miracles  
to go along with loving all the wrong people.  
Too much power  
in the hands of an unpredictable God.

We don't like it either,  
this unpredictable God.

I want a comfortable God,  
placated with prayer  
and easily accessible.  
Instead I've got this wild God,  
loving what I despise in my own heart,  
and loving what I fear in the world.

My best guess, is that Zacchaeus was a wee little man,  
short of stature,  
not Jesus.

Who knows what Jesus looked like?  
Not me,  
I only know what he did.

Sure,  
he healed the sick  
and raised the dead.

But what he really came to do,  
was to eat with the sinners,  
to tell unbelievable stories,  
pointing to an unpredictable God.

He came to seek out  
and to save the lost.

And that's a miracle too.