

## **“Perching, Perceiving, and Pirouetting”**

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
October 30, 2022 – Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost

[Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Luke 19:1-10](#)

Please pray with me: “O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, and take our hearts and set them on fire. Amen”  
(William Sloane Coffin).

Perched high on a watchtower was the prophet Habakkuk, the author of our first reading, who peered out over his people and did not see righteousness and justice in action, but rather, as we heard, he saw violence, wrong-doing, trouble, destruction, strife, contention, lawlessness, injustice, and wickedness. What Habakkuk saw was not a pretty sight! And so he stood high on a watchtower longing for God to cast to him another, better vision for his people.

Our second reading from the gospel according to Luke also offers us the story of a character who is also perched high while hoping to catch a glimpse of something better than what he could see from the ground. Zacchaeus was a wee little man, as we learned in our youth, who climbed to his perch in a sycamore tree to see Jesus when he passed by one day as he was too short to see over a crowd that had also gathered to see Jesus. Little Zacchaeus may have been small in stature, but he towered in importance and power as a rich, chief tax collector, which also likely made him a person who was largely despised, for the people reviled tax collectors, seeing them as thieves who stole from them to enrich themselves and who worked to enable the ruthless Romans to maintain their oppressive reign over them.

While Zacchaeus was on his perch, Jesus saw him, just as God saw Habakkuk centuries earlier and also offered him a better vision for living than what he had known. Zacchaeus, the reviled tax collector, was offered a vision of being accepted just as he was as Jesus called to him and asked to visit with him in his home, which in their culture was a sign of welcoming love. Those who had gathered on the ground grumbled, reacting negatively to Jesus’ acceptance of Zacchaeus, whom they considered to be a filthy, despicable sinner to avoided, not a fellow Child of Abraham to be seen, welcomed, and embraced in fellowship. But Zacchaeus saw the vision of accepting love that Jesus had cast to him.

Perceiving the beauty of a gracious offer, he hurried down from his perch and welcomed Jesus into his home, and, more importantly, he pirouetted, committing to turn from his thieving ways, to give away his possessions to the poor, and to make reparations to those he extorted while collecting taxes. The wee little man received a grand vision for living in love, and in embracing the lofty way of love, he found salvation.

I don't know about you, but I feel like I could use a little more salvation in my own life this morning. And I know our world could use a lot more salvation today. When we look out over humanity, or gaze closely upon our own hearts, we see clearly that we are in deep need of something better. For the ways that Habakkuk saw before him so long ago continue to be our common ways. There is too much violence, wrong-doing, trouble, destruction, strife, contention, lawlessness, injustice, and wickedness in our world, and we have not enacted God's lofty vision for us of creating a just world for all. The good news is that God is still searching for us, seeking to cast us a vision for a better life and a better world if we would just perch ourselves where we could perceive this vision, receive it, and then turn from our old, destructive ways of being as we see this vision realized by our own faithful efforts. We can be changed, and we can change the world.

Today, on this Reformation Sunday, we remember those of our spiritual ancestors who caught this vision of God in their time and struggled to change the world by having our faith tradition come closer to ideal ways of love that Jesus called us to embrace. We are grateful for those like Martin Luther, who spoke out against practices of leaders of the Church that caused harm to people by extorting money from them, saying that their loved ones who died and were in purgatory could be set free and go to heaven *if* they gave money to the Church, or, in the words of Dominican friar and peddler of indulgences Johann Tetzel, "As soon as gold in the coffer rings, the rescued soul to heaven springs." And as Congregationalists, we are grateful for those reformers who struggled to create religious communities where all members participated in governing themselves and seeking after the welfare of their fellow members. We are grateful for those who continue to work towards enacting God's vision for a Church where all freely receive and share God's redeeming love.

And we pray that we would catch God's vision this morning and join with so many of our spiritual ancestors, such as the Reformers and those who lived among us and inspired us to love (we will be recognizing many of these modern saints shortly on this Remembrance Sunday). We pray that God would work through us to see this vision of a better world be realized more fully in our time, that the legacy we would leave for future generations would be one of continuing to reform ourselves and all the institutions of the world's people by becoming more loving towards all, welcoming of all, committed to enacting justice for all, and so engaged in the holy work of bringing more of God's peace to all.

Dear friends, let us never stop gathering to worship, and so perching ourselves where we could catch a glimpse of the divine vision; let us never stop perceiving a new and better reality for our lives and the lives of all the world's people; and let us never stop pirouetting -- turning, turning, and turning again -- to realign ourselves always to face in the direction of God's choosing. May we do so on this good day and on all the better days to come. Amen.