

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

The trunk is small enough that I can get my arms around it,
but just barely.

I don't know what kind of tree it is,
but I do know that it is common to the banks of Salt Creek.

I have climbed hundreds of them,
I just don't know the name.

I toss my head back and stare up into the branches,
measuring with the critical eye of an inveterate tree-climber.

This is it.

This is the one.

My friends have spread out along the banks near me in their own searches.

I could hear them if I were listening,
but I am alone with my tree.

It is summer and I am nine years old.

I shinny up the trunk until I get to the first branch and grab on.

As I snake my way up through the branches,
the canopy above me becomes more diffuse
and the world around me loses its green tint.

As I arrive at the top of the tree and my head breaks through the surrounding canopy

I am in a different world.

The sun seems brighter up here and the air fresher.

The branch I stand on has the diameter of a dime.

If I don't keep my feet close to the trunk the branch will give way.

The trunk itself is little thicker than a broom pole.

The risk of catastrophe adds to the rush of excitement I feel.

Even the slightest breeze gives motion to my perch.

Swaying in the wind I can look out over the school yard
and beyond that to the edge of my world.

From my aerie perch I see things that people on the ground miss.

From my different perspective,
even common place objects look new and different.

In our Gospel today we find someone else climbing a tree; His name is Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus is not a child,

but he is short of stature,

and his name means “pure,”

so it would appear he is at least close.

Zacchaeus is climbing because he wants to get a good look at Jesus.

What he doesn't know (and then again maybe he does)

is that climbing a sycamore tree

will give him a perspective on Jesus that nobody else has.

His main goal, I suspect, is to get rid of all the obstructions

that were coming between him and Jesus.

It took guts to make that climb.

He no doubt, looked a bit silly up in that tree;

and I am sure he caught a lot of flak from the crowd nearby,

but you have to admit that he had the clearest view around.

At the same time,

and without his knowing it, (and then again, maybe not!)

Zacchaeus was presenting himself to the Lord,

for there is surely nothing more obvious than a grown man in a tree,
short stature or no.

Zacchaeus was a rich tax collector,

and worse than that, a rich *chief* tax collector.

That title makes Zacchaeus a notorious sinner by default.

And so, it was with all *that* baggage

that Zacchaeus appears in the tree before Jesus.

And Jesus sees him,

all of him,

and calls him down from his perch.

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”

No one saw that coming!

In this encounter we catch glimpses of the Kingdom of God

through the leaves of a Sycamore tree.

We see humanity with all of its shortcomings

clambering up out of the turmoil of life

to approach and be approached by God.

We see a loving God breaking through our defenses and into our lives,

and bringing new life into the midst of our daily struggles.

The tree that Zacchaeus climbs is a rich symbol. It is a spiritual tree.

Like an earthly tree binds together earth and sky,

with roots anchored in the ground and branches spread to the breeze,

so a spiritual tree binds together the hard truths of the world around us,

with the hope that is the Kingdom of God.

From the branches of a spiritual tree

the grace of God shines more fully upon us,

And the gentle breeze of the Holy Spirit more easily sways our actions.

And yet this tree is firmly anchored in the world around us.

It is physical, incarnate, and sacramental.

When we have the courage to climb into a spiritual tree,

God calls us down into a different world.

Climbing a spiritual tree could be a metaphor of many different things;

the discipline of prayer,

an act of forgiveness to an angry foe,

an act of kindness to an unknown person in need,

Or countless other things.

In the end they are all sacramental moments;

moments of God's grace working in the world

through our concrete actions.

And when we take part in one of these moments,

like Zacchaeus, we are changed.

The road to the City of God has many trees growing along the way.

They provide shade to the weary traveler

as well as an opportunity to lift ones self up to gain new perspectives,

and to again come into the presence of God.

But to gain their full benefit, they must be climbed.

And that takes courage; the courage of a child.

It has been over thirty years since I went back to my tree for a visit.

At that time it was still growing peacefully along the banks of Salt Creek

where the creek wraps around Central Road School

in the town of Rolling Meadows.

The tree was bigger then, but so was I.

I remember walking up and resting my hand on the bark

and whispering a quiet hello

as I recalled all the joys that we had shared.

There were children running around in the school yard,

and I wondered if any of them had climbed my old friend.

I looked up into the leaves

and remembered the joy and wonder of a nine year old

and his early brushes with the infinite

as he gazed out on the works of God with new perspective.

I didn't climb the tree at the time though,

because I'm an adult now and adults don't climb trees,
at least not when children are watching.

And I didn't linger for very long

because solitary adults lurking on the boundaries of the school yard
induce anxiety now a days.

And so, it was a nice visit, though all too brief,
but something was missing.

Now that I have moved out of the Chicago area,

visits to my tree happen virtually through the modern miracle of Google Maps.

It is even worse than Zoom, but so far it appears

that my tree is still growing strong along the banks of Salt Creek.

And so, before too much more time goes by,

I think I may have to make another visit to my first spiritual advisor,
on a day when school is not in session.

And this time, who knows, even at the ripe old age of 64,

I just might climb that tree
no matter who is watching.

Amen.