

Elsie was 89 years old. She lived in a nursing home in a room about the size of a postage stamp. She had a bed, a dresser, a chair, and a small television set and a nightstand. On that nightstand was a bible that she'd had all her life. The leather cover was so well-worn that you could almost see through it. Her name, once engraved in gold letters on the cover, was practically invisible. To open her bible was to open the story of nearly nine decades of a life of faith. Page after ancient page, marked up, underlined, scotch-taped and highlighted through every transition of her life—birth, baptism, Sunday School, worship, confirmation, engagement, marriage, pregnancies, graduations, deaths—life events that gave Elsie opportunities to celebrate God's remarkable, extravagant, unwavering, unconditional love for her. I'd pull up a chair next to her and we'd talk about all of that.

But the thing that we talked about most was not reflected in any of those moments in her long life. The things we talked about were part of some darker struggle that chased after her ancient soul. Elsie battled with believing God's love for her. For some reason, this beautiful 89 year old woman struggled with the idea that God could really love her. For some reason, based on some misguided notion that God's unconditional love was conditional; that because of something she once did, said or thought in her life, some vengeful god was just waiting to lower the boom on her, or that there was something she could possibly do to somehow appease an impossibly fickle, angry, childish god, Elsie just quit living fully into who God had called her to be and hoped that she could struggle through—just keeping her head above water to the end.

So I began to chip away at that. Here's how I did it: in the chapel of the nursing home there was a little poster on the wall. There was a blessing on the poster, a phrase that I memorized so that I could look into Elsie's eyes at the end of our visit and say these words out loud to her hoping that the words would find a way into her heart. At the end of every visit I'd take her hands in mine, look her in the eyes and say this: Elsie, you are saved by grace. You are justified, you are forgiven. You are sought out; you are hidden in Christ and made for the glory of God. You are known, you are never forsaken, you are held in the palm of God's hands; you are loved. May God's peace and power be with you until we meet again.

And then this misty eyed 89 year old, sweet saint would close her eyes and let the words sink deeply into her heart. And she'd pat my hand and say thank you. And I'd walk away just wondering if those words would stay with her. I must have spoken that blessing a hundred times to Elsie—none more poignant than the last time I spoke them to her. Over the years those words have become part of the very fabric of my life because I've needed to be reminded often that I am loved and treasured. And I've used those words here through the years because I know that you are a treasure that you are loved.

Last week Paul Dean talked about how we go about naming our needs. This week we're dealing with the deepest of all human needs: the need to know that we are loved, truly treasured and accepted

exactly as we are. Of course we know all about “conditional love”—love that is given as long as we measure up and behave, perform well and jump through the hoops. Unfortunately a lot of us were convinced along the way that God's love operates that way too. And people spend their entire lives trying to measure up, behave, perform well, and jump through the hoops to either make God love them a little more or dislike them a little less.

But the good news is that Jesus reveals something entirely different. The whole message of the gospel is a reminder that God loves us, period. The message of Jesus' whole life is that we're saved by grace. We are justified, we're forgiven. We are sought out; we are hidden in Christ and made for the glory of God. We are known, we are never forsaken, we are held in the palm of God's hands; we are loved. All of that is rooted deeply in the ancient story of Jesus' encounter with that wee little man named Zacchaeus. [Read Luke 19:1-10]

Zacchaeus was one complicated brother and here's how complicated it was: Zacchaeus was a tax collector—not just any tax collector, but a chief tax collector. And Zacchaeus was hired by the oppressive Roman government to collect exorbitant Roman taxes from the Jewish people. And because Zacchaeus was Jewish we can only imagine how every holiday, family picnic or baseball tournament was a little dicey for him. Did Zacchaeus struggle with all of that? Maybe. Was he disgusted when he looked at himself in the mirror? Maybe. But for sure it was a weird, complicated place to be—stuck between two worlds having sold his soul, so to speak by working for the oppressive Roman government collecting taxes from his own people. But while everything about Zacchaeus was upside down, Jesus enters the story and turns everything inside out, because that's what he does. As Luke tells it, Jesus comes through town and Zacchaeus is really intrigued with him. So Zacchaeus runs ahead, climbs up into a tree because he doesn't want to miss seeing Jesus and waits.

Now because this kind of writing is ultimately more poetry than history, we get to wonder about all of this: And I do wonder—does Zacchaeus think he has to elevate himself to come eye to eye with Jesus? Maybe. But Jesus sees him, recognizes him, and seems to know him—he calls him by name! And then the invitation: “Zacchaeus, you come down” Jesus says, Come down, come out, open up, be honest, be who you truly are and were created to be—fully you, fully known and fully loved. So Zacchaeus is on the level with Jesus, Jesus meets him on his turf, and Zacchaeus is changed, transformed.

In this ancient story of Zacchaeus we see the reflection of ourselves and the pain of feeling unloved. Things get in the way—like the twisted branches of a large tree, things twist us up: things like past hurts, feelings of unworthiness, the grinding power of shame, and the fear that we'll be overwhelmed and hurt again. But we also see Jesus who sees us and calls us by name and longs to know us more deeply and be in our lives.

But the question is this: how do we climb down from the tree and deal with the crazy voices inside that try to convince us that we're not good enough, don't have enough of this or that; that God is perpetually angry with us. How do we get our heads around the mistaken idea that God couldn't possibly love us because of things we've said, thought or done? The ancient story from Luke 19 answers those questions and invites us to embrace the invitation to come down, come out, open up, be honest be who we truly are and were created to be—fully ourselves, fully known and fully loved.

Let me tell you how I struggled with that very message. Like most, if not all of us, early on I was given an image of God. At some point, someone said to me, "Paul, this is what God looks like. This is what God does. This is how God operates." I've always called that the theological 3x5 card. And most if not all of us at some point in our lives were handed this card by mostly well-meaning people—Sunday school teachers, parents, friends, pastors, ministers, priests, rabbis; maybe even Uncle Dave or Aunt Sheila, after Thanksgiving dinner a long time ago—told us what to believe about God. And with all due respect, maybe you—like me just embraced all of that without really thinking too much about it. We just embraced the image of God that we were handed on that little 3x5 card by all of those well-meaning people. And now that's what we believe. I think that might have been the case with Zacchaeus. He'd heard things about this man, Jesus, but he wanted to find out more. He wanted to know for himself. So he sought him out—climbed up into that tree and waited to see Jesus. And when Jesus came by, Jesus called him out and said: (singing the song) "Zacchaeus, you come down from there—because I'm coming to your house today. I'm going to your house today.

So why did Jesus go to his house? Because Zacchaeus needed help. Jesus came to this lonely, friendless, tormented, man and set him on new ground. There is something refreshing in the invitation to come off whatever pedestal we've got ourselves on or whatever hiding place we've made for ourselves and just come down, get grounded, get our feet back on the ground. Like Zacchaeus, maybe a lot of us are just trying to see Jesus. Who is he? What is he about? What's he calling us to do? But, like Zacchaeus, perhaps we too are being called out of the shadows and into the light of Jesus' presence. We're invited to come down, come out, open up, be honest be who we truly are and were created to be—fully ourselves, fully known and fully loved.

But maybe it's time for a new 3x5 card. Maybe it's just time to change the narrative. Maybe it's time to see Jesus for who he really is—someone who sees you where you are, knows your name, calls you to come out of the twisted branches and into his unconditional love and grace and mercy. Would you like to see Jesus in a new way today? Are you caught in the complicated family tree of theological misunderstanding? Do you ever think of the things you were taught as a kid—if you were taught as a kid and find yourself simply asking, "What?" Or when you do think about the deeper things of God you just don't want to have anything to do with that?

Maybe it's time for a new 3x5 card. Maybe it's time to reframe what's on your 3x5 card to a message that says, "As you go from this place, go knowing that you are gripped by God's grace. You are fully known

and fully loved. You are already forgiven, you are always sought out. You are never forgotten, never held in disdain. There is nothing you need to prove. You are forever held in the palm of God's hand."

I'll never forget the last time I spoke these words for Elsie. It was beautiful morning as a small gathering of friends and family stood together at Elsie's grave. We were there to remember and give thanks for her life. And holding an ancient bible—one with a leather cover engraved with a name that God knew so well, a bible filled with ancient pages that were marked up, underlined, scotch-taped and highlighted. And as a blessing to send her on her way, I spoke the words that had finally captured Elsie heart before she died and gave her a brand new life: Elsie, child of God you are saved by grace. You are justified, you are forgiven. You are sought out; you are hidden in Christ and made for the glory of God. You are known, you are never forsaken, you are held in the palm of God's hands; you are loved. May God's peace and power be with you until we meet again.

That's why today, these words become our words to bless us on our way: we are gripped by God's grace. We are fully known and fully loved. We are already forgiven, we are always sought out. We are never forgotten, never held in disdain. There is nothing we need to prove. We are forever held in the palm of God's hand; we are loved.