

“Short People” (or Short in Stature)

In 1977 the singer-songwriter Randy Newman released a single that he called “Short People.” Anybody remember it? For some reason, the song got a lot of airplay, and for three weeks was number two on the U.S. Billboard Hot 100. It ultimately became a gold record, meaning it sold over 500,000 copies.

Why was it so popular, for a singer-songwriter that had relatively few hits in his career? It is sometimes categorized as a “novelty song,” but perhaps its appeal went deeper than that. Listen to these lyrics.

Short people got no reason, short people got no reason  
Short people got no reason to live. [Really?!]

They got little hand, little eyes,  
They walk around tellin’ great big lies  
They got little noses and tiny little teeth,  
They wear platform shoes on their nasty little feet

Well I don’t want no short people  
Don’t want no short people  
Don’t want no short people around here.

Brutal, right? Here comes verse 2.

Short people got nobody, short people got nobody,  
Short people got nobody to love.

They got little baby legs that stand so low  
You got to pick ‘em up just to say hello  
They got little cars that go beep beep beep  
They got little voices goin’ peep peep peep  
They got grubby little fingers and dirty little minds  
They’re gonna get you every time

Well I don’t want no short people  
Don’t want no short people  
Don’t want no short people around here.

But in between verses 1 and 2, right in the middle of the song, Randy Newman placed this bridge.

Short people are just the same as you and I  
All men are brothers until the day they die.

The song, in other words, was a parody, a commentary on prejudice. Unfortunately, that didn't keep Newman and his song from being misunderstood. He received lots of hate mail and several threats for allegedly making so much fun of short people. Newman was flabbergasted that his critics could believe anyone was as "crazy" as the character in the song, saying or singing those words.

Zacchaeus, as we all know, was a "short person." Or as Luke describes him, he was "short in stature." Luke doesn't say anything about Zacchaeus' hands or toes, noses or teeth. He doesn't say what kind of shoes Zacchaeus wore on his "nasty little feet." He didn't need to. He said simply that Zacchaeus was a "chief tax collector." And that was more than enough.

The past two Sundays we've heard sermons involving your "run of the mill" tax collectors. How they were first-century Jews who worked in collusion with the Roman government by collecting taxes from his fellow Jews. Because of which they were hated, and considered grievous sinners, beyond the pale of both earthly welcome and eternal salvation.

So if tax collectors were bad, "chief" tax collectors were worse. If tax collectors were sinners, chief tax collectors were "chief sinners." They were the individuals who benefitted most by the often unjust taxation of their fellow Jews. They were the ones who truly got rich off of it.

Let's recall that the Gospel of Luke is particularly hard on rich people. Story after story after story. Mary's Magnificat, which blasts the rich, sending them away empty in Chapter 1. The pronouncement of "woe" upon the rich in Chapter 6. The Parable of the Rich Fool in Chapter 12. The story of The Rich Man and Lazarus in Chapter 16, in which the rich man dies and goes straight to Hades, where he is tormented. The sad story of the Rich Ruler in Chapter 18, to whom Jesus pronounces that it is harder for the rich to enter the kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

Had Zacchaeus heard any of these stories? Did he really choose to be rich, essentially damning himself in the process? Of course, he hadn't chosen to be short of stature, had he?! Which had damned him to a different kind of torment. How many of those situations in our own lives that have caused us all manner of torment—or worse, that threaten to damn us forever—are the results of our own choice?

Zacchaeus had apparently heard of Jesus. Enough that when he also heard Jesus was passing through town, he wanted to see him (or rather, "see who he was"). Curious statement, that. Did he merely want to see if Jesus was all he was rumored to be? Problem was, Zacchaeus was, well, short. Anytime crowds were gathered, unless he was in the very front row, all he could see were other people's backsides. But as we discovered, Zacchaeus was determined to see Jesus. Forever making the sycamore tree the most famous kind of tree in the whole world. (Anyone ever climb a sycamore tree? What or who did you see?)

Surely it would have been extremely embarrassing for Zacchaeus to climb that tree, with his first century clothing, let alone to just sit there in the branches. Surely many in the crowd had made great fun of him. But sometimes our determination—or maybe, our sudden, inexplicable sense of hope—is so strong, that we no longer care about being embarrassed.

You know what I believe? I believe Jesus can sense whenever we are embarrassed, or worse, desperate. I believe he can sense when we are determined. I wouldn't be surprised if he is the very one who ultimately gives us that determination. And so, yes, Jesus saw Zacchaeus in that tree. He probably knew he was up there even before he saw him. Because of which, Jesus completely changed his itinerary. His disciples must have been frustrated; they had been

planning on just passing through. But Jesus just all of a sudden invites himself to Zacchaeus' house.

What he actually said was, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." Another translation of the Greek would be "It is necessary for me to stay at your house today." What a loaded, powerful, profound statement that is. "It is necessary." Think of how many different ways that can be interpreted. It could be anything from "I need a place to sleep tonight, and I here you have an extra room" to "it is God's will that I stay with you." Or, "I sense you are desperate, and I want to help you." Or, "it is extremely hard for the rich to be saved, but I want to save you." Or, "the crowds today want to condemn you; I must show them that I do not." Or how about this. "It is necessary that I come and stay with you, because it is part of my mission to help you." Which is essentially what he told the crowds. He told them "the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

In what ways are you lost today? In what ways are you short in stature? In what ways are you determined to rise above it (pun intended), to "grow in stature?" Or have you lost all determination, and simply given up? No matter; Jesus is seeking you, and he will find you.

In my study of this text the past week, I learned something that I had never heard before. That there were some leaders in the early church who thought it was actually Jesus who was short in stature. Think about it; verse 3 says that Zacchaeus "was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature." How do we know that the "he" referred not to Zacchaeus, but rather to Jesus? That the reason Zacchaeus couldn't see Jesus an account of the crowd was because Jesus was short?

But then, that would make all kinds of sense, wouldn't it? That would explain how Jesus knew what it felt like to be short in stature. That would certainly explain how the central lesson of this story is that yes, even "short people" are loved unconditionally and extravagantly by God. Doesn't matter how stubby you little legs are. Doesn't matter if you are the chiefest of all the chief sinners and tax collectors in the world.

Once you truly discover how extravagantly God loves you, you will want to live extravagantly in return. You will want to do whatever it takes to set things right. Just ask Zacchaeus. He pledged to give half of his significant wealth possessions to the poor, and anyone he had defrauded (which would have been a lot of people) he pledged to pay them back four times as much! Boy was Zacchaeus feeling good!

But of course he was. His life had been turned around. May it also be so for us, no matter how short we are. (Did you bring your checkbook today?)

Amen.

Questions for Pondering or Discussion.

What are some other kinds of people that we tend to make fun of, or look down on (pun intended)?

How rich do we have to be to be in danger of losing our salvation?

What conditions or characteristics can make it hard for us to "see" Jesus?

Would you like to be Zacchaeus? Why or why not?

What do you think of the idea that it might have been Jesus who was short in stature, rather than Zacchaeus?

Tell about a time when your determination made you unafraid to be embarrassed or made fun of.  
Can Jesus sense when we are ashamed? How do we know?  
I what ways do you feel lost or “small” today?