

Learning from the Sycamore

Luke 19 v1 – 10

This year in OCF we are focusing on 4 key areas for growth:-

- Community and Fellowship
- Leadership and direction
- Growth and stability
- Restoration and healing

By:-

- a renewed structure
- focused teaching
- an empowered community

Today we will be 'Learning from the Sycamore' and in particular I want to focus on what I believe is the key call of God this year for us in OCF - to be **an 'empowered community'**.

What does an empowered community look like and what do I mean by an empowered community?

I've thought for 30 years or more that this story of Jesus encountering Zaccheus was all about Jesus befriending one man and making him change his ways and therefore change his eternal destiny.

In fact it isn't just the story of one man but it is the **rebuilding and empowering of a community**.

This is not the Jericho of Joshua but it was built near to where the old ruins were. When the original Jericho was destroyed Joshua said “**Cursed** before the Lord is the man who undertakes to rebuild this city, Jericho.”

Jesus enters this cursed city and transforms it. Are we a curse reversing people?

a) An empowered community has an eternal impact even beyond its human resources - v1. Jesus was 'passing through' – He knew He wouldn't be staying around or developing long term friendships. I've been in OCF for over 28 years and I have some strong friendships that I've formed over that time but Jesus was barely going to be here in Jericho for 1 day and yet he had an impact.

We can all have an impact even in those moments – don't have to be in each other's pockets every minute of every day for 28 years.

Even today in the tea and coffee room maybe there will a conversation that will reverse a curse, that will gently challenge a wrong attitude, that will affect someone's eternity.

Every individual affects the whole community, we cannot sit on the side-lines thinking we don't matter.

When Achan sinned after the fall of Jericho it was the community that suffered, when Saul sinned it was Israel that lost the battle, when Adam and Eve chose to ignore God it was the whole of mankind that suffered.

The little boy whose dead body has been found in Edinburgh – the whole community is grieving – we do not live alone and those who are struggling around us need a community that is empowered by God to have an eternal impact on each other (Nadia last week released me as she read scripture and she and Rebecca prayed for me: an eternal impact – who knows how far reaching?).

b) An empowered community **tackles things head on** - People were chattering about Zaccheus but Jesus tackled it head on – no point back-biting and complaining to others about someone: speak to them directly – help them to transform. Gossiping about others is sinful (toothpaste and 6th form – it can't go back in once it is squeezed out – it was probably my tutor's way of warning us about sex but it is so appropriate for so many things – including gossip in the church.)

So many times I hear of something that someone has said about someone who said they heard something about someone else who had done something or said something to someone and I know it's not true or, even worse, it's only half the truth.

Don't listen to gossip – if there is something to be tackled then tackle it head on – not behind people's backs. It sickens my heart and sickens God's heart that people he died for are being spoken of so unlovingly.

Jesus saw the problem with the community and addressed it = Zaccheus. The enemy wants us to back bite and spread gossip. He wants us to work in the opposite direction to God.

c) Zaccheus was out of fellowship and community – no-one let him through and so he found a sycamore. **The sycamore lifted him up** – it was strong enough, it didn't judge him or rebuke him but lifted him so he could see Jesus – do we lift others, those who are out of community, so they can see Jesus? Where are we spending our time? Is it with the popular and the easy? The relaxing and the encouraging? Or do we occasionally mix with those we find difficult? Street Pastors get abuse but still go out!

Are we encouraging and lifting and holding each other up? The sycamore didn't save Zaccheus but what if the tree hadn't been there? Would he have been noticed? What if OCF wasn't here? Who would not be lifted up?

Jesus saw the desperation of Zaccheus: to do such an undignified thing and probably something out of character. Maybe everyone else just saw Zaccheus's money and position and size, but Jesus saw his desperation.

Maybe Jesus had been praying to find a catalyst? Do we pray every morning – **Lord show me who you want me to encourage**, to heal, to restore, to befriend today? – he saw Zaccheus in the sycamore tree.

People in an empowered community notice each other. It's so powerful to be noticed.

And when Jesus had encouraged Zaccheus by noticing him see what happens – instead of using his gifts against the community Zaccheus empowers his community by offering his wealth to the poor to those he had previously swindled!

It was no longer A community but HIS community – that's where the power lies – when we own our community instead of sitting on the outside watching it and judging it – he started to contribute and take part and empower others out of the overflow of what he had to offer.

An empowered community calls out the best in each other. We encourage, we support, we high five, we praise, we challenge, we exhort, we urge and we stir each other on to the high calling of Christ in our lives. We cannot grow without each other.

Jericho was associated with a curse, and carried shame just as we can carry shame with us. Zaccheus had continued that curse by the way he cheated and swindled and lived his life away from the community that God had placed him in – and then Jesus came passing through.

Isaiah 1 v18 'though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool'

Not just Zaccheus but the whole community of Jericho experienced Jubilee when Jesus passed through – a freedom from the past, a wiping clean of sin, an escape from the curse.

We don't get told but I imagine in this transformation of Zaccheus the community learns to forgive – the enemy had sent that community in the direction of unforgiveness, resentment, bitterness, judgementalism and Jesus, passing through, has such a Jubilee impact that the community is turned around and they begin to walk in the opposite direction to the one the enemy had started them in – it started with Zaccheus being noticed in a tree and it ended with salvation for a whole community.

What eternal impact and response will we make today? Will we become the empowered community that God wants us to be?

Our response today is not about what we can get from God or from each other but what do we need to do to be an empowered community? Will we commit – to the community He has placed us in?

Do you need to tackle judgementalism or unforgiveness or working in the opposite spirit to the one God wants us to work in?

Will we have a determination to give and to give and to give as Zaccheus did because he had met Jesus.

Will we be a sycamore – that lifts others up to Him? No matter who they are.