

“New Perspectives: You’ve Always Belonged”

November 2, 2025

The first thing I saw when I woke up this morning was that the Dodgers won the World Series. The second was a call to local churches to protest outside the NEW Pride Fest today. UGH! So much of 2025 has felt like a gut punch. From personal things to political things—and now, even sports—everywhere I turn there seems to be one more blow.

When Pride Fest was postponed earlier this fall, that was already a gut punch. It was supposed to be in September at the Brown County Fair Grounds, but the threats against our LGBTQIA2S+ community were so high, the organizers decided the risks were just too great. And then today, seeing people proposing to protest this celebration of love and diversity—in the name of Jesus!—made my stomach turn.

I’ll admit, I was surprised when the Pride organizers announced the new location, the Oneida Casino Hotel, until I thought about it a little bit. Aside from the airport across the street, where in town is there better security than at the casino? And who better understands the power of a small, resilient community celebrating identity than our Indigenous siblings? Suddenly it made perfect sense. Security and solidarity—those are antidotes to violence and divisiveness.

And that idea—seeing things from a new angle—is where we meet Zacchaeus today.

Most of us learned this story as kids: Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.

Cute song.

But the story’s not just for Sunday School—it’s about how God changes who gets seen. Now, Zacchaeus was a tax collector. In Jesus’ world, that meant two things: You got rich by overcharging your neighbors, and you worked for the enemy—the Roman Empire. So, Zacchaeus was not a popular guy.

But, remember, Luke’s Gospel loves flipping the script. The “wrong” people keep turning out to be the right ones: the Samaritan, the foreign leper, the tax collector praying in the temple. So here’s Zacchaeus—short in stature, short in reputation, and yet tall in curiosity. He can’t see Jesus through the crowd, so he does something wild—he runs ahead and climbs a tree.

Now, respectable men in that time didn’t run. They didn’t climb trees. But Zacchaeus doesn’t care. He just wants the perspective to be able to see Jesus.

And Jesus looks up and says, “Zacchaeus, hurry down. I must stay at your house today.” And here’s where we usually say Zacchaeus met Jesus, felt convicted, and repented. He promises to give half his wealth to the poor, pay back anyone he’s cheated. It sounds like a dramatic conversion, right?

Except... the Greek doesn’t make it that clear.

He might be saying “I will give,” or he might be saying “I give.” The way the Greek reads, Zacchaeus may ALREADY be that generous! If that’s the case, this isn’t a story about a crook turning over a new leaf. It’s about Jesus acknowledging the goodness that was already there—goodness other people refused to see. Think about that: To a community that had written Zacchaeus off as corrupt, unworthy, unclean, Jesus says, “No, this, too, is a child of Abraham. This one too belongs.”

That’s precisely what we’re doing at Pride Fest today. We’re saying to both the crowd and Zacchaeus that all of the societal baggage that has been heaped on over the years can’t cloud the fact that you are beloved, that you belong, that you are a child of God.

Our passage from Isaiah dovetails with that beautifully. “I have had enough of your burnt offerings,” God says. Your prayers, your rituals, your festivals—none of it matters if your hands are stained with injustice. It’s not that God doesn’t like worship. It’s that worship means nothing if it doesn’t lead to compassion. “Seek justice. Rescue the oppressed. Defend the orphan. Plead for the widow.”

This is also why, starting next week, we’ll be DOUBLING what we stock in the Blessing Box each week amidst the federal government shutdown of SNAP benefits. Doing justice, seeing everyone as a child of God, no exceptions - that’s what faithfulness looks like. And in a way, Zacchaeus is already doing that. He’s giving to the poor. He’s making things right when he’s wronged someone. But his neighbors can’t see it. All they can see is his job title, his reputation.

And Jesus says, “Open your eyes. Salvation is happening right here.” And that’s what our work as the church is all about—learning to see each other (and the wider world) the way God sees us.

- Because of you, Union Church changes lives.
- Because of you, someone will walk into Pride Fest today and hear that there is a God who loves them, that there are Christians who love them, not in spite of who they are, but because of who they are.
- Because of you, families find food and dignity through our Blessing Box.
- Because of you, elders who’ve felt forgotten are remembered.
- Because of you, children learn that God’s love isn’t just for the perfect or the pious—it’s for everyone.
- Because of you, we keep climbing trees—doing whatever it takes to get a better view of what God is doing in this world.

You see, we are Zacchaeus. We’re the ones climbing trees, trying to catch a glimpse of grace above the noise. But also, sometimes we’re also the crowd, needing Jesus to remind us: “This one, too, belongs.”

Today, as we dedicate our 2026 pledges, it’s not about a budget line. It’s about perspective. It’s about saying, “We will be the kind of community that sees. We will keep showing up. We will keep giving. We will keep making love visible in this place.”

When Isaiah says, “Learn to do good,” he doesn’t mean random acts of kindness, though I suppose he wouldn’t have been opposed to those. He’s talking about committed justice. That’s what a pledge really is—a commitment to keep doing good, even when the world feels like a gut punch.

And maybe, when we do that, we’ll hear the same words Jesus said to Zacchaeus, “Today salvation has come to this house.” Because salvation isn’t about heaven someday. It’s about making this house—this community—a place where people are seen, loved, and reminded that they belong.

That’s what your giving does. That’s what your presence does. That’s what your faith makes possible.

So if you’ve felt like Zacchaeus—misunderstood, overlooked, or too small to matter—hear this: You don’t have to hide who you are. You don’t have to earn your belonging. God sees you. God delights in you. And God calls you to help others feel the same. Because of you, salvation comes to this house. And thanks be to God, because of you, Union Church changes lives.

Alleluia and Amen.

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Luke 19:1-10, Isaiah 1:10-17
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