It’s a story about not being able to see and about learning to see again. It’s about testing our assumptions, and being open to new perspectives. For instance, we assume that Zacchaeus had to climb up in a sycamore tree because he wanted to get a good look at Jesus as he passed through town and was too short to see over the crowd that had gathered to see him too. At least that’s the impression that the Bible school song about the “wee little man” has reinforced for many of us. But some scholars argue that the line stating “he was short in stature” might just as easily refer to Jesus as Zacchaeus -- meaning that it was Jesus’ small frame that caused him to get lost from sight except for those who were right up close. It all depends on how you read it, on how you look at it.

Whether Zacchaeus was short or not probably doesn’t matter much when it comes to the heart of the story. What does matter is that this same man who climbed up in a tree to get a look at Jesus had spent his life getting rich by climbing on the backs of the poor who were now crowded around Jesus. As a tax collector employed by Rome he had benefited handsomely from an economic system that exploited and cheated his neighbors. After all, Luke says that Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector in Jericho, which was a big city, big enough for Herod to keep a nice house there. By charging over and above what the empire expected, folks like Zacchaeus kept their portfolios fat. That was simply how it worked; no wonder that when John the Baptist had been the one drawing crowds he had turned to the tax collectors and said, “Stop taking more than the amount prescribed for you” (Luke 3:12-13).

So whether Zacchaeus was climbing trees or the social ladder, clearly he liked the view from on top. As long as he could stay above the fray he could put up with the Romans and even with the haters who resented him for working for the enemy. Hey, a guy’s gotta make a living, right? Or as Tony Soprano might say, “It’s just bidness. Bad-a-bing, bad-a-boom.”

Only after this particular day, there would be no going back to business as usual. There would be no more looking down on his neighbors, or seeing them only as a means to an end, as pockets to be picked, as an opportunity to be exploited. I have no idea why Zacchaeus went out of his way to see Jesus -- maybe he was just curious about what all the buzz was about, or maybe there really was something eating away at his gut and his conscience, something that only a genuine prophet and not a profit margin could heal. But whatever nudged him in the direction of Jesus, he would never look at himself or his world in the same way again.

What’s amazing in this story is that even though Zacchaeus has so much trouble getting to a place where he can see Jesus, Jesus doesn’t seem to have any trouble zeroing in on him. And that should be both a comforting and unsettling word for us, all at the same time. Because we know what’s it like to struggle to see Jesus and to understand who he is and what he’s about. We need to make more time for prayer, we say. We need to spend more time reading the Bible, we say. More time focusing on our faith. Well, here we are reminded that no matter what keeps us from the way of discipleship, Jesus just cuts right through it all and, in the words of Isaiah, he calls us by name, and we are his. This story does take place in Jericho, after all, and in Jericho, the walls are gonna come tumbling down. God won’t let anything stand between us and his way.

And the way of God, the way of Jesus, by the way, is down. Down from whatever lofty places we’ve taken ourselves. Down and back into the thick of the fray, back into relationship
with the people and places in this world that maybe we’ve tried to avoid. That’s the danger -- and the promise -- of Jesus walking into our lives. He calls us, not to get so spiritual that we go flying off into another dimension, but that we come and join him where he is. That we get our feet planted firmly on the ground and start noticing how we are living in relation to everyone else who is sharing this planet with us.

And lo and behold, that’s what happens with Zacchaeus. He climbs down from the tree and almost immediately gains a new perspective on the people in the crowd. No longer does he see them as obstacles to be overcome or people to be exploited; now he sees them as neighbors who deserve justice, who deserve to be treated with dignity and respect. “Half of my possessions, I will give to the poor, and those I have cheated, I will pay back four times what I owe them.” Not only that, but he welcomes Jesus into his home. Zacchaeus turns from a life of hoarding to a life of hospitality.

That’s how Jesus changes us. That’s the greatness and gravity of his grace. He pulls us back into this world with a new commitment to compassion for neighbors we may not have noticed before. And when it comes right down to it, I think that’s what all the real saints do for us as well. At least the saints I’ve experienced seldom seem too concerned about inspiring us to focus on the life we can’t yet see, the life of heaven. Instead they have a way of helping us to see more loving, more just ways to live the life we can see, the life right here on the ground.

I think of Eileen Becker, and her gentle yet persistent and tough as nails way of never letting me forget that a growing number of our neighbors in Athens are immigrants from Mexico and other Hispanic countries. “There’s a meeting tonight about the literacy program. I’d be happy to give you a ride,” she’d say with that twinkle in her eye.

Or Jake Tinga driving me around town, giving me my first tour, and making sure that I met everyone on his Meals on Wheels route. Or reading Dorothy Day and her audacious claim that we should take Matthew 25 seriously and assume that each hungry person we meet is Christ in the stranger’s guise. Or meeting Sister Helen Prejean and hearing her Louisiana drawl demanding that I believe the same thing about prisoners, even those on death row.

“Come on down, Zacchaeus,” he says to the man in the tree. “Come on down,” he says to all of us. “Come on down and join my parade of life right here on the ground.”