



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Courage to Change

Keola Whittaker © 19 April 2026

I. Introduction

Now picture the crowd in this story.

Jesus is passing through Jericho, and the whole city has come out to see him. It is loud and pressing and alive with anticipation. And somewhere at the edge of that crowd is a man named Zacchaeus -- a tax collector, a collaborator, a man who has made himself comfortable by extracting money from his own people. Everyone knows who he is. Everyone knows what he's done.

And this man wants to see Jesus. But he cannot get through. He is short, and the crowd -- the very people he has harmed -- are standing between him and what he is reaching for. So he does something that must have looked absurd: he runs ahead and climbs a sycamore tree.

I want you to hold that image. One of the most compromised men in town, up in a tree, alone above the crowd that has every reason to keep him out. Straining toward something he is not sure he deserves to see. Not knowing whether the door is open. Not knowing whether, if he came down, anyone would make room for him.

That took courage. Not the heroic kind. The small, desperate, undignified kind. The kind that makes you climb a tree in public because you do not know what else to do. The kind that says: I want to find my way back, even if I am not sure I will be received.

And then Jesus stops. Looks up. And sees something. Not just a man in a tree. A man who wanted badly enough to get through the crowd that he ran ahead and climbed. A man whose very presence there -- undignified, exposed, straining -- was itself a sign. Not proof of

change. But the beginning of it. The desire for it. And Jesus, reading that desire, says: Zacchaeus, come down. I am coming to your house today.

The crowd grumbles. Of course they do. He has gone to be the guest of a sinner. Their anger is not wrong. Zacchaeus has taken from them. And yet the table is set. The door is opened before Zacchaeus has proven anything, confessed anything, repaired anything. The welcome comes first. The welcome comes first.

And something happens that no argument or condemnation had produced. Zacchaeus stands up at that dinner, a changed man, and says: I will give half my possessions to the poor. Whoever I have cheated, I will repay four times over. The welcome produces the accountability. The open door is what makes the return possible.

II. WHAKAMĀ

The video we just watched gave us a word for what Zacchaeus was carrying up that tree. Whakamā -- a Māori concept often translated as shame, but far richer than that. It is the state of being in the gap: between who you are and who you are meant to be. The exposure of that distance. The darkness of having to sit with what you have done and who you have been. A very specific kind of shame.

What makes whakamā remarkable is not the darkness it names. It is what the tradition insists happens next. The community doesn't look away to shun the person. It doesn't punish or permanently exclude. It holds the person. It protects their mana -- their dignity -- while they find their way back. The community's job is not to decide whether the person deserves return. It is to create the conditions that make return possible.

I want to name that I receive this concept as a guest. I come from the Hawaiian culture and tradition, not Māori, and my own tradition has a parallel practice called Ho'oponopono -- a process of communal reconciliation, of setting right what has become broken between people. The forms differ but I think the impulse is the same. And when I heard this video, I recognized something I believe is also native to

this tradition. Something Universalists -- who have always insisted that no one is beyond the reach of love -- should recognize as their own.

Zacchaeus was in whakamā up that tree. And Jesus, and the small community that followed him, chose to be the people who held him. Who protected his dignity in the face of a crowd with legitimate grievance. Who said: come down. We will make room.

III. THE HONEST ADMISSION

I want to be honest with you about something.

I believe all of this. I preach it. I believe the circle must stay open, that restoration is not just possible but necessary, that the beloved community is built by setting places at tables for people the crowd would turn away.

And there is a group of people whose turning back toward the light I find genuinely hard to receive.

People who supported a politician and a related political movement that caused real and predictable harm to vulnerable people. I won't name that politician here today from this pulpit because I don't think I need to. You know, right?

And there are those in that movement who are now, having seen the consequences, stepping back. Saying they see it. Asking, in some cases, to come back into community with the rest of us.

I notice something in my body when I sit with this. A tightening. A voice that asks: where was your concern before? The harm was visible. What he would do was obvious. The consequences were predicted, clearly, in advance. And the choice was made anyway. And I have to wonder: Is this genuine reckoning or is this the luxury of regret now that the costs have become personal?

I suspect many of you have a version of this. Not necessarily with the same leader or the same group. But someone -- some category of person -- whose dignity you find hard to protect right now. Whose return feels incomplete because the reckoning feels incomplete.

I am not going to tell you that feeling is wrong. It is not wrong. The harm is real. Restoration without honesty is not restoration, it is erasure. We do not have to pretend otherwise.

But I keep coming back to Zacchaeus up that tree. And to the crowd standing between him and what he was reaching for. And I find myself asking: am I in that crowd? And if I am, what does it mean to look up?

IV. TWO KINDS OF COURAGE

What strikes me most about this story is how much courage it required from everyone involved.

Zacchaeus climbing that tree was an act of courage. Not grand courage -- small, exposed, undignified courage. He had to be seen wanting something he was not sure he could have. He had to make his desire for return visible to the very people he had harmed. He could have stayed home. He could have told himself it was too late, that the gap was too wide, that the crowd would never let him through. Instead he ran ahead and climbed a tree. That is the courage of *whakamā*: to show up anyway, to be seen in the gap, to risk rejection in the reaching.

And Jesus calling him down was also an act of courage. The crowd was right there. Their grievance was legitimate. Choosing to set a table for Zacchaeus was a choice made in full view of people who had every reason to object. It cost something socially, relationally, politically.

The beloved community is not built without that cost. Both kinds of courage are necessary.

The person who has caused harm must find the courage to come down from the tree -- to show up, to be seen, to not hide behind excuses or wait until circumstances force their hand. And the community must find the courage to open the door before the person has fully earned it -- to wager that welcome is what makes transformation possible, even when that wager feels risky and the crowd's anger is understandable.

Neither is easy. Neither is instinctive. Both are acts of love. Both are sacred.

V. A CONTEMPORARY SYCAMORE TREE

This is not only ancient story. It is happening in our own time.

Let me tell you about Adrienne Black. She grew up at the center of white nationalist leadership in America. Her father founded one of the first major white supremacist websites. She was being groomed as the future of the movement. When she enrolled at New College of Florida, she was eventually found out as a white nationalist. Students organized against her. The anger was legitimate - she had caused real harm, and her ideology targeted and endangered real people. The crowd had every reason to close the circle.

And then Matthew Stevenson, one of the few Orthodox Jewish students on campus, a person whose community had every reason to stay in the crowd, did something that looked, from the outside, a bit odd like Jesus having dinner at the home of the tax collector. He took a risk. He invited Adrienne to Shabbat dinner. Not to debate her. Not to argue. Just to eat. To set a place at the table for someone the crowd had turned away.

He kept inviting her. Week after week. The table kept being set. And that was the catalyst for Adrienne to take a 180 and renounce white nationalism, her family, and to join a new community.

Adrienne has spoken publicly about what changed her. It was not argument or confrontation. It was proximity -- being known by people her ideology had taught her to fear, and discovering they were fully, irreducibly human. The quiet dinners could not have happened without the community also naming clearly what was wrong. Holding and honesty together. Matthew's invitation was courage -- the courage to look up into the tree and call someone down, in full view of a crowd with legitimate grievance.

And Adrienne found her own courage. She left the movement and has spent years working to undo the harm her platform caused. She has also later come out as transgender -- another sycamore tree, another

act of courage, another self that could only emerge because someone first made room.

Two kinds of courage. One table. One transformation that neither of them could have produced alone.

VI. RETURN AND CLOSE

The beloved community is not a community without whakamā. It is a community that knows what to do when someone is carrying it. It looks up. It sees the person in the tree. It says: come down. There is room for you here.

Not because the harm did not happen. It did. Not because the reckoning is complete. It may not be. But because the table is where reckoning becomes possible. Because welcome is not the reward for transformation -- it is the condition that makes transformation real. You cannot demand the change first and then open the door. The door has to open first. That is the wager the beloved community makes. That is what it costs. That is what it is for.

I am still working on this in myself. There are people I find it genuinely hard to look up at and say: come down. The tightening in my chest is real. But I also know that if I wait until I feel ready, the tree may be empty by the time I look up.

Martin Luther King Jr. spoke of the beloved community as a society based not on punishing transgression but on transforming it. That is the Universalist vision -- the one this movement was founded on, the one that says no one is ever beyond the reach of love. Not eventually. Not conditionally. Now. Everyone.

Our love needs to be wide enough to see those we despise. That love looks up into trees. It sets places at tables. It holds people in whakamā while they find their way back. It honors the dignity of the person in the gap and it honors the courage it takes to bridge it, on both sides.

I wonder who in your life is up in a sycamore tree right now. Straining to see whether the door is open. And I wonder what it would mean,

what it would cost, and what it would make possible, for you to look up and say: come down. There is room.

And maybe as I say all of this, you recognize yourself somewhere in the story. Maybe you are in the crowd, carrying a legitimate grievance, being asked to find the courage to look up.

Or maybe, maybe you are the one who has climbed the tree. Who has caused harm, or supported something you now regret, and who is straining to see whether there is still a way back. Who is wondering whether anyone will notice that you are up there, and whether what brought you there -- that desire, that reaching -- means anything. I want you to hear this: it means something. Jesus saw it in Zacchaeus. The community can see it in you. Come down. There is room.

May we be brave enough to climb the tree. May we be brave enough to call each other down. And may we build together a community worthy of the love that holds us all.

Amen.

Meditation / Discussion Question

When have you been most afraid -- and what, or who, held you while you moved through it?