

Zaccheus and that Sycamore Tree Teach Us How to Live by Faith

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The 'Good News' is that no matter what has happened in our past, Jesus walks into the dusty streets of our own lives this very day. We need to be in position to see Him and respond to His loving invitations.

The Sycamore tree created a clear line of vision for Zaccheus. It helped him to rise above the crowd and see the Lord clearly. It placed him in the right position for the invitation that would follow. Jesus told him to come down for he was coming to his house! Imagine the thrill. For us, the Sycamore tree is a symbol of that place in our own lives which enables us to have a clear vision of Jesus. Zaccheus did not hesitate. With the same lack of caution which he had demonstrated in climbing the tree, he came down to stand in the presence of God Incarnate. There he heard the call that would forever change his life. So may it be with all of us. When God calls we have only one choice, to respond without reserve.

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CHESAPEAKE, VA (Catholic Online) - Where is Jesus passing through in our own lives? He always shows up for those who have their spiritual eyes opened to see Him. How about in our workplace? How about in our relationships? How about in our families?

Are we running out to meet Him? Or are we afraid? Are we wondering "if we see Him, what will He ask of us?" The invitation of this story is to climb that Sycamore Tree; to find the place that will make it possible for us to see Jesus

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In the last chapter of the Gospel of St John we read *"There are also many other things that Jesus did, but if these were to be described individually, I do not think the whole world would contain the books that would be written."* (John 21:25) This verse underscores the importance of the stories that are actually recorded in the Gospels.

The people to which we are introduced in these wonderful accounts have been selected from among many others for a purpose. They can put us in touch with the Lord, ourselves and the purpose of our lives. Upon prayer and reflection, they become an invitation to conversion.

St. Jose Maria Escriva once wrote *"I advised you to read the New Testament for some minutes every day, and to enter into each scene and take part in it, as one more of the characters. This is so that you incarnate the Gospel, so that it is "fulfilled" in your life. and "make others fulfill it" (Furrow #672).*

St. Luke introduces us to a tax collector named Zaccheus:

"At that time, Jesus came to Jericho and intended to pass through the town. Now a man there named Zacchaeus, who was a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man, was seeking to see who Jesus was; but he could not see him because of the crowd, for he was short in stature.

"So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree in order to see Jesus, who was about to pass that way. When he reached the place, Jesus looked up and said, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house."

"And he came down quickly and received him with joy. (When they all saw this, they began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner." But Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over."(More than what the Law required)

"And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost." (St. Luke 19:1-10)

The Context

Israel was under Roman occupation. An unfair tax was extracted by people like Zaccheus who worked for the oppressor. They earned their living by adding an extra surcharge for themselves. These Jews were considered traitors. However, they were still Jews, sons of the Covenant and children of Abraham, trying to make a living. Zaccheus was not unlike some of us in our own day, separating "what we do" from "who we are".

"After all" we may tell ourselves, "we are simply trying to make a living." Yet Zaccheus wanted to see Jesus more than he wanted to maintain his economic comfort. Jesus knew that. He had come to Jericho that day seeking to save the lost. He knew Zaccheus like He knows each one of us. The "crowds" around Zaccheus may have

deemed him as unworthy of the encounter that was about to occur but God did not see him this way. Jesus saw Zaccheus' heart and he drew him to Himself.

Each one of us should find hope in this story because, literally or figuratively, we have compromised in our lives. Perhaps in our work, by failing to live fully the implications of our faith. Perhaps in our family, by failing to love in the way that we know we ought, sacrificially.

Perhaps in our "free time"- by giving into pursuits that we know actually lead to bondage. The "Good News" is that, no matter what has happened in our past, Jesus walks into the dusty streets of our own lives this day. He comes for us. Let us learn some lessons from Zaccheus about life in a Sycamore tree.

Remember that God is already there

Jesus already knew that Zaccheus was in Jericho. He knit him together in his mother's womb (Psalm 139:13-16) and knew everything about him. In fact, the Lord came to Jericho for Zaccheus. He did not need to get the Lord's attention and neither do we. Jesus comes into each one of our lives, searching for us, because He still comes to ".seek and save what was lost."

We often think of the Christian life in terms of our efforts to reach God and to do His will. However, the opposite is what really occurs. God seeks us and we respond.

However, we need to "position" ourselves for the meeting. Zaccheus climbed that tree to see Jesus; he positioned Himself for the encounter; the call, the vocation that was given to Him that wonderful day. Those words of the Master "*Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendant of Abraham. For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.*" would forever frame his future responses to God's continuing invitation. He would never be the same.

The Christian life is about God's action and our response to what He is already doing. Jesus reminds us "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (John 15:16). Zaccheus serves to remind us of who does the choosing and who does the responding. At the root of the word "vocation", is the latin word "voca", meaning "voice". Zaccheus teaches us to learn to listen for the voice of God in our personal lives and respond without holding anything back. He also teaches us to look for Jesus along the road of life.

Focus on the Lord, not "the crowd."

Faith is not a vicarious experience. While others can help to bring us to Jesus, He calls our name and we must personally respond. Not just once, but every day, every moment. Faith is a door into an ongoing, intimate dynamic relationship with a living, loving God who, in Jesus Christ, has come to seek and save the lost. Jesus reminds us "You did not choose me but I chose you." (John 15:16)

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The "crowds" in our lives rarely lead us to God. Remember the exchange with Simon Peter recorded in the Gospel of St. Matthew, chapter sixteen? Jesus asks the disciples *"Who do men say I am". They told him what the "crowds" said about Him. "Some say John the Baptist, others Elijah.."* Jesus then spoke personally to Simon and asked *".but you, who do you, say I am."*

Peter replied *"You are the Christ"*. You can almost sense the joy pop off the page of the biblical text when you read the words of Jesus that follow Peter's response: *"Blessed are you Peter for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven."*

In the Lord's invitation and Simon's response we find the foundation for a living faith. Simon was forever changed, signified biblically by the changing of his name, his identity, to "Peter". He went from being an enthusiastic, sometimes mercurial follower, to being a "rock", a leader, configured to the image of the One whom He served.

He would spend the rest of his life responding to that call and eventually pour out his own blood in obedient love for Jesus Christ as a martyr.

Desire to see Jesus more than anything or anyone else

The story of Zaccheus invites us to ask ourselves if we are serious about fully and truthfully living out our Christian vocation. Do we really want to see Jesus or are we comfortable with keeping Him at a distance? Do we compartmentalize our lives, living a separation between faith and life that keeps religious things in a "religious compartment", treating faith like a hat that we put on and take off depending upon the environment that we find ourselves in?

The Christian vocation is a call to ongoing conversion by giving ourselves away to the One who poured Himself out for us and being transformed in the process. It is about giving our whole lives over to the Lord who takes up His residence within us and then continues His mission through us.

The Apostle Paul wrote to the early Christians in Galatia "No longer do I live but Christ lives in me and the life I now live I live by faith in the Son of God." (Gal 2:19, 20) We also live "in Christ" by living in His Body, the Church, of which we are members by our Baptism.

That way of living "in Christ" is meant to become our daily reality as well. Christians are called to live differently because we live "in" Jesus Christ. We are also called to love differently, because we love "in" Jesus Christ. We are invited to "be" differently, because we are different now, at the deepest level. Jesus Christ continues His life and mission on this earth through His Body, His Church, of which we are members. (Rom. 6, Coll. 2, 1 Cor 12)

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Zaccheus looked foolish that day. Especially to a crowd that was so quick to judge him. It did not matter to him. In fact, looking foolish to the crowd is "part of the program". Are we willing to do so? St. Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians in his first letter: "*God has chosen the foolish things of this world to confound the wise.*" 1 Corinthians 1:20-27

The Corinthians lived in a City that prided itself on its great accomplishments. It was also drunk on its own debauchery. The early followers of Jesus did not and could not "fit in." They had to be willing to look foolish. In our own day, we share a similar plight. In the midst of a culture that has seemed to have forgotten God, we are called to live differently.

Always look for Jesus Passing By

Where is Jesus passing through in our own lives? He always shows up for those who have their spiritual eyes opened to see Him. How about in our workplace? How about in our relationships? How about in our families? Are we running out to meet Him? Or are we afraid? Are we wondering "if we see Him, what will He ask of us?"

The invitation of this story is to climb that Sycamore Tree; to find the place that will make it possible for us to see Jesus, unimpeded, so as to hear Him call our name. He still comes to seek and to save what is lost. He still comes to the homes of all who open their hearts wide to his presence and are willing to live lives bathed in the light of His refining fire.

When we see Jesus on the Jericho Road of our own lives we are invited to exercise our faith, to choose Him and change. He does not do the changing in the relationship. He is the same "yesterday, today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

Prayer is not, in the first instance, about getting God to do what we want. It is about entering into an intimate communion with Him and in Him, and then abiding (St. John 15). In that relationship, we invite Him to change us and we learn to surrender all to Him in love. It was the late, "great" (though he would reject the accolade)

How extraordinary is this wonderful love of God and how hard it is to comprehend its invitation. The God of the entire universe came among us as a man to show us both the love of the Father and how we are now invited and empowered, through His life, death and resurrection, to live in this world and prepare for the next. Zaccheus teaches us about life in a Sycamore Tree. Let us learn to live our lives always looking for Jesus.