THE AMAZING LIFE THAT IS YOURS

I read a poem that seemed to speak eloquently about our gospel character Zacchaeus; perhaps it might have a message for you as it did for me when I first discovered it. The poem is by Leonard Nathan, former professor at UC Berkeley, and it’s entitled “So?”

So you aren’t Tolstoy or St. Francis or even a well-known singer of popular songs and will never read Greek or speak French fluently, will never see something no one else has seen before through a lens or with the naked eye.

You’ve been given just the one life in this world that matters and upon which every other life somehow depends as long as you live, and also given the costly gifts of hunger, choice, and pain with which to raise a modest shrine to meaning.

So? Perhaps the poem needs little commentary. Behind it lies a question many of us ask ourselves from time to time: Given my small, ordinary, un-famous, and fleeting life, what can I do that’s of true worth and value? Then it offers an answer that is simple, real, moving, and doable. Using everything I have — including my own ‘costly gifts of hunger, choice, and pain’ — what can I do today to keep raising the ‘modest shrine to meaning’ which I’d like to create with my life?”

So? What do we know about the one life of today’s gospel hero Zacchaeus? We know that he was short in height. It may not seem like an important detail to know about him, but when you recall how rarely the scriptures give any physical description of the characters in the Biblical accounts, we should pay attention to any details about physical appearance. Notice, for example, that the gospels don’t record a single physical description of Jesus—we don’t know his height, his facial features, the color of his hair, whether or not he had a beard or mustache, or the color of his eyes. These details would never be omitted from a contemporary biographer’s account of a famous person. But the scriptures don’t share our curiosity about such matters. So when the Bible does record a physical descriptor, we should sit up and take notice.

Zacchaeus is described as very short—the Greek word in the original text is “micros,” from which we get the word “microscopic.” So, he was certainly vertically challenged. Besides helping us understand why a grown man would climb a tree to see Jesus pass by, what’s the significance of this reference to his short stature? Just imagine what it might have been like for Zacchaeus as he grew up!
All his life -- the victim of insensitive jokes and comments about his height. Pushed around by bullies on the childhood playground; always shorter than the girls whose attention and affection he sought as a teenager, always living under the cloud of resentment and insult as he struggled to live in a world of what seemed to him to be giants. Perhaps Zacchaeus made a childhood vow that “one day, they’ll all look up to me.” Maybe that’s why he became a tax collector, a sawed-off shyster of a man, a swindler and a crook, who made his wealth in the worse ways possible? He’s the town’s chief sinner according to every religious, political, or polite standard one could imagine... but he ends up at the table with the Lord, welcomed into the Kingdom of God. What are we to make of that?

Many years ago as a young seminarian, I went on a retreat at a Jesuit retreat center in Guelph, Ontario in Canada.

It was a time of a lot of soul-searching – youthful self-doubts and questions about my chosen vocation in life. The wise spiritual director listened attentively to me, but didn’t say much in response. Instead, he gave me a scripture passage to ponder – the passage from the Book of Wisdom that we just heard: For you, O Lord, love all things that are and you loathe nothing that you have made.... But you spare all things, because they are yours, O Lord and lover of souls, for your imperishable spirit is in all things! Those words made all the difference in my life at that moment – an affirmation of the intrinsic value of life and all creation, and God’s merciful, all-embracing love for everyone, including me. None of the ups-and-downs of life can change this unalterable truth. God loves you and me unconditionally.

This week I stood at two different hospital beds at two different hospitals. I stood there in your name, in the name of the community of St. Perpetua, to offer the consolation of the Church, the sacramental presence of Christ through the anointing of the sick, and the assurance of the prayers of all God’s people.

Anointing of the Sick

One bed in ICU held a parishioner, tubes projecting from various incisions, breathing tube down a parched throat, the incessant background noise of medical machinery monitoring pulse and heartrate and bodily functions. The elderly patient’s eyes closed in struggling recovery from surgery since none of the medications were able to bring relief. I offered the prayers trusting that an imperishable spirit deep inside could hear and understand, was aware that this life of hers was more than a “modest shrine to meaning” as the poet said... that she was loved and cherished by God who was always at her side.

The second bed was more difficult to approach, a much younger patient who struggled for four years with cancer, having an intimation of how serious her condition is, yet unable and unwilling to let go, to admit that her children, on the brink of adulthood, may not have her guidance and presence much longer.
I want to believe but I don’t know what to expect... if there will be something more after this life. The words of our Creed rang hollow even as I tried to assure her of a new life to come: I believe... in the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sin, the resurrection of the body and life everlasting. I wish I would have memorized the words of the poet: You’ve been given just the one life in this world that matters and upon which every other life somehow depends as long as you live...

As Zacchaeus discovered, wealth, or the absence of it, isn’t a predictor of spiritual status after all. The opinions of an entire village don’t count as much as the opinion God has about us. And whatever one’s past, there’s always a possible new future with God’s grace, if we will just accept the invitation of Christ. “Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.” And with that amazing word of grace, as they celebrated around a table, Zacchaeus was so overwhelmed by God’s love that it soaked all the way to his wallet. And the former tax collector became a wealth dispenser, splashing grace everywhere in the same way it had come to him.

Fortunately, for us, we can experience that awakening in less dramatic but no less meaningful ways. Each time we encounter the Lord, as did Zacchaeus, we come in touch with a fresher and deeper call to live life more fully, to spend ourselves more generously, to look at our world more lovingly. Here, in the Eucharist, as we drink in God’s saving Word and break the Bread at this holy table, we are all called to be transformed. As the poem I began with suggested: So you aren’t Tolstoy or St. Francis or even a well-known singer of popular songs and will never read Greek or speak French fluently. But we have each been given just the one life in this world that matters and upon which every other life somehow depends as long as you live.

That life is yours — unique, precious in God’s eyes, unrepeatable and unconditionally loved by Our Lord and lover of souls, whose imperishable spirit is in us all!

Use that life to build a “modest shrine to meaning” and to make a difference in this world in whatever way God’s grace invites you.

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