

Going Out on a Limb

This colorful and visual Gospel.... so congenial to the imagination.... raises some interesting questions....

For starters, why did Zacchaeus climb the tree??

The obvious answer is that he was, as the Gospel notes, short and couldn't see over the crowds...
.... but that's only part of the answer.

Remember, Zacchaeus is not only a tax collector on behalf of the occupying Romans..... and considered a betrayer of his own people....and a despicable thief.... BUT he is listed as the CHIEF tax collector,
.....which puts him beyond the pale.

So he is in danger from the crowd.... if they should recognize him; so, to avoid being seen and beaten up, he gets out of their way and climbs a tree to hide among the branches in safety.

A second question: why did he want to see Jesus in the first place??? An obvious answer is that he was curious: Jesus was a minor celebrity, a wonder-worker ...so he had heard..... Jesus happened to be passing through Jericho and so natural curiosity drove Zacchaeus.

But again.... that's only part of the answer.

Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus not merely in the sense of sighting... but in the sense of trying to 'psych' Jesus out:
-where he's coming from,
-what's he like?
-what is he like, inside? -what makes him tick?

Yet, as we said, because of the hostile crowdhe hesitated and almost decided to stay home.
....what if the crowd saw him?.....ridiculed him?what if Jesus detoured another way?
....what if he turned out to be nothing?
....a bust? a disappointment?

Better to be safe than sorry and stay put.

What Zacchaeus saw from his vantage point was someone among the rabble..... not above them.

He heard him preach..... witnessed his compassion...his kindness to those in need....and he was captivated by what she saw...it changed his life.

The third question: what happened next??

Well anyone who goes through all that trouble deserves more than a passing glance....
.....and so the tables are turned.

Zacchaeus sees Jesus..... Jesus sees Zacchaeus....
..... he looks up and calls him by name.

This name calling is a rare occurrence and happens only once or twice in the Gospels.

And then Jesus tells him to come down among the hostile crowd.... and with some hesitation.....Zacchaeus does just that....and then, surprise!!!!

Jesus informs Zacchaeus that he has invited himself to his house to break bread!

Fourth question: what about that unfriendly crowd??? They remain unfriendly! they begin to murmur, murmur, murmur all over the place. The gist of all their murmuring is that their hero has gone to eat at the house of a sinner.....

But Jesus corrects them and reminds them, that even so, Zacchaeus too is a descendant of Abraham, that he too, in spite of whatever wrong he has done, is a child of the promise.

That would be equivalent to a Christian reminding a murderer that, even so, Jesus died for his sins.

Fifth question: What happens next??

Zacchaeus proclaims his innocence.... *'I don't think I have.... But IF I have extorted anything from anyone....I will repay 4 times over....'* Whatever the case, Jesus reminds this murmuring crowd that he has come to seek and save those who are lost....

Lost here doesn't mean "damned"... but means "in the wrong place" and Zacchaeus was certainly there... ..and now he was in the right place..... with Jesus!

And now, **the final and most important question:** What does this Zacchaeus story mean for us??

Let me suggest by way of a story:

In the 1800s the poet John Greenleaf Whittier wrote one of the most quoted poems in the English language: the poem was titled, "*Maud Miller*."

You've never heard of it?? Actually not many people remember this sorrowful poem,but, generations of people have quoted two famous lines from its final stanza.

"*Maud Miller*" is about a young maiden, who – while working in the fields one day – sees a handsome young judge riding on horseback.... She offers him a cold drink of water. Their encounter last only a few moments.... but makes a deep impression on both of them.

Maud is greatly attracted to the judge and she dreams of marrying someone of his gentleness and integrity.

At the same time the judge is attracted to Maud. He is tired of his career and he dreams of marrying a warm, compassionate woman like Maud.....and settling into a simpler life in the country.

But neither Maud nor the judge acknowledges their attraction to each other.... They are from different social classes.....they cannot risk breaking the bonds of social conformity.

Time passes and Maud marries a man who brings her much pain and hardship.... The judge enters into a loveless marriage....

In the final stanza of the poem, Whittier offers us this famous warning:

*For of all sad words of tongue or pen,
The saddest are these: It might have been!*

A strong message of the Zacchaeus story is that he finally set his jaw and took the plunge
....he decided to take the risk....
....he dared to go out in public to see....to embrace....to follow Jesus and discover a new way of life.

And in this story, there WE are.... always on the verge of commitment.... always close to the decisive act....
the heroic deed....the real holiness to which we feel attracted....
but, like Zacchaeus....are hesitant to embrace it.

Why!??? The truth is, that what haunts us is what haunted Zacchaeus: what of the crowd???? What will others think? What will they do?

Murmur, murmur, murmur, murmur.....

*“Hey, I see you got religion,
what happened to you? don’t be a party pooper....”*

And all this because you decided to go out on a limb:

All because you decided to go to church,
All because you joined a prayer group,
All because you pray,
All because you avoid the drug culture... or avoid doing things that hurt people,
All because you won’t use dirty and vulgar language,
All because you have become an advocate of the poor and marginalized,
All because you love God and it shows....
All because you don’t want to have to say at the end of your life, *“it might have been....
if only I had answered the call..... the impulse, to see Jesus and follow him...”*

So the Zacchaeus story winds up challenging us to go out on a limb....

It is an invitational story....its message is: beware of the *“might have been”* and embrace St. Paul’s words:
“Now is the acceptable time.”

Amen.