

31st Sunday of Ordinary Time

Cycle C, 10.30.16

Wisdom 11:22-12:2; 2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2;

Luke 19:1-10

**RAISING A MODEST SHRINE
TO MEANING**

I read a poem recently 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 read 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.*"

And to compensate for the lack of his physical prowess, Zacchaeus learned to be ruthless during the isolation and loneliness of his childhood. Could the war within Zacchaeus over his physical condition be the explanation for the person he became in later life — a sawed-off shyster of a man, a swindler and a crook, who makes his wealth in the worse ways possible? If so, he wouldn't be the first nor last person whose bruised adulthood began with a childhood trodden underfoot. 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 — 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.

As Zacchaeus discovered, wealth, or the absence of it, is not a predictor of spiritual status after all. The opinions of an entire village do not count as much as the opinion God has about us. And whatever one's past, no matter how horrible, 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.



The movie "Sully" is playing in Walnut Creek right now. The film follows Chesley Sullenberger (Sully) — a pilot who lives in Danville -- and his January 2009 emergency landing of a passenger jet on the Hudson River, which all 155 passengers and crew survived with only minor injuries. In the credits following the movie, there are photos of the real Sully and many of the passengers who were actually on that flight. Several years after the crash, thirty-five of them gathered for a reunion at the Aviation Museum in Charlotte, where the jetliner they were flying in that extraordinary day is on display. They talked about how that miraculous rescue changed their lives forever. One gentleman said: *I know there are other things I'm supposed to do with my life.* A young woman said: *I see it as a second chance for life; my husband and I have signed up with an agency to adopt a baby.* Another woman said: *I question everything now. Is this the type of work I'm supposed to be doing? I wonder: what next?* With an emotional voice a man said: *My life*

has been touched by a miracle, so I have to give back something. And another grateful husband said: *I try to get up every morning and look at my wife differently, hug my kids differently.* Those passengers' close call with death awakened them to a deeper appreciation for life.



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 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, break the Bread at this holy table and unite ourselves with one another, 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, the 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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