

## Proper 26 Year C—Luke 19:1-10

I imagine we all like Zacchaeus, don't we? He was a friend of Jesus who we might say today was "vertically challenged." I know what it's like to be vertically challenged, but in the opposite direction. You always head to the back row when it's time for photography and search for a pair of knee socks that is long enough for you. Zacchaeus, handicapped by lack of height, was probably teased as a boy, but he tends to draw us out. With a name like Zacchaeus, he probably sat in the back row in school, but he was too short to see around the other boys and missed some of what went on up front. But for me, what makes Zacchaeus lovable is that in his zeal to see Jesus, he was willing to abandon his dignity, run down the street, and climb a tree to see the Man from Nazareth.

Zacchaeus lived in Jericho, which because of its location, was an important customs center. Jericho had a great date palm forest and famous balsam groves, which perfumed the air for miles around. Then there were the gardens of roses, which were known far and wide. Zacchaeus was not only a tax collector in this wealthy region, but "chief tax collector," which meant all the other tax collectors were under him. Zacchaeus was much despised. Since Jericho was so prosperous at the time, it is no wonder that Zacchaeus had grown rich.

Although Zacchaeus was wealthy, he must not have been happy. He would be lonely, for he had chosen a way of life which made him an outcast. He heard of a man named Jesus, who welcomed outcasts and sinners, and wondered whether Jesus might have a word for him. Despised and hated by men, Zacchaeus reached after the love of God. Zacchaeus was so determined to see Jesus he would let nothing stop him. For Zacchaeus to mingle with the crowd at all was a courageous thing to do. Many a man in the crowd would take the chance to nudge, poke, or even kick the little tax-collector. Zacchaeus would be black and blue with bruises that day. Zacchaeus could not see, but he decided to make a radical decision for God. He ran ahead and climbed a fig-mulberry tree. The fig-mulberry tree has been described as like an English oak. It has a short trunk and wide lateral branches forking out in all directions. Once Zacchaeus was atop the tree, Jesus could see him and immediately invited himself to stay at Zacchaeus' house. The crowd grumbled about Jesus staying with a sinner, but Zacchaeus had been transformed. "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor."

We are nearing the end of Year C, the Year of Luke. I have mentioned before that each Gospel writer had his particular agenda. One of Luke's biggest pieces of agenda concerned wealth and poverty. Perfect discipleship, for Luke, entails total renunciation of one's personal possessions for the sake of the kingdom of God. In the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, Jesus says, "None of you can become my disciple if you do not give up all your possessions." Jesus apparently expected a kind of monastic renunciation of his immediate disciples. But Luke was also aware that not everyone is capable of living up to such a high standard of renunciation. Zacchaeus wins Jesus' high approval. Jesus says "Today salvation has come to this house." And why? Zacchaeus said he would give half his possessions to the poor, not all his possessions. Well, most likely, there was a Mrs. Zacchaeus and several Zacchaeus juniors. How could Zacchaeus support his family if he gave up all his possessions?

Stories of people who voluntarily give up great wealth are strikingly fascinating. One of the best-known examples is, of course, St. Francis. St. Francis was the son of a wealthy silk merchant and spent his youth in extravagant pleasure-seeking and fruitless military exploits. He had a dramatic religious conversion through a vision of Christ and encounters with beggars and lepers. Much to the horror of his father, Francis renounced all material values to devote himself to service of the poor. *Lesser Feasts and Fasts* makes the droll remark: "Of all the saints, Francis is the most popular and admired, but probably the least imitated."

Gautama the Buddha was born a prince about 500 B.C. into a very wealthy royal family in North India. As legend has it, his parents had a premonition that if he should see the truth about the sad realities of old age, suffering, and death, Gautama would leave the royal palace behind and become a monk. The parents protected the boy within the palace compound with all the trappings their money could buy. But it was inevitable that as a young man, Gautama got out. Seeing suffering humankind, Gautama left all wealth behind and sat under a tree in the forest until he became the enlightened Buddha, living only to relieve the sufferings of others. If you go to India, you can see that tree to this day, or at least one of its offspring.

In 2010, a new organization was formed.. The leaders are Bill Gates and Warren Buffett. It is called *The Giving Pledge*, and none of us are likely to become members. You see, only billionaires are invited to join the organization. Those who join agree to give at least 50% of their

wealth to charity, either before their death or at the time of their death. The group could have been called *The Zacchaeus Foundation*. So far, 204 billionaires have joined.

Warren Buffett and Bill Gates have both been the world's wealthiest men in different years. Buffet has pledged to give away 99% of his fortune, primarily through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which is the largest private foundation in the world. Its primary aim globally is to improve health care and reduce extreme poverty. In America, it aims to improve education. Buffett has already given \$30.7 billion to the Gates Foundation—the largest charitable donation in history. Buffett doesn't believe in passing great wealth from one generation to the next, as he wants all members of his family to contribute actively to society. I would like to say that both Gates and Buffett are so deeply involved in charitable giving because of their religious faith. Apparently both are agnostics. But both men have a sense of moral values. They don't care much about organized Christianity, but they like the teachings. Gates is much encouraged by wife Melinda. I wonder what Jesus would have to say about Buffett and Gates.