

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

I'm five six. When I was in school, where height matters, I was never the shortest person in the class, but I was always among them. Tall people were able - in every respect - to look down upon me. So, with other short people I promoted certain advantages we held: When we tripped, we didn't fall down as far as tall people did. When we took a shower, it didn't take as long. When it started to rain, we were the last to be bothered by it. We even started an organization called Height Watchers for talking people out of growing tall. Our patron saint was a character in the Book of Job, Bildad the Shuhite. "Shoe-height?" Shortest man in the bible? Anyway, I've always felt some affinity with Zacchaeus.

The encounter between him and Jesus happens because each is looking for the other, though they seem not to know it. You've heard that some short people speak loudly and forcefully to compensate for what nature did not give them. Maybe that was Zacchaeus. But on this day he "was seeking to see who Jesus was." Perhaps as "a chief tax collector and also a wealthy man," he wanted to forsake false ways. After all, the crowd scorns him as "a sinner." We don't know his motives. He may have climbed that tree to get a better view of Jesus, but he may have unknowingly climbed it to get a better view of himself.

Jesus, on the other hand, was a man on a mission, in a hurry. Luke says he arrived in Jericho intending "to pass through the town," treating it like flyover country. But when he approached this certain tree, something moving caught his eye - the indecorous Zacchaeus clinging to its branches and to his dignity without much success. Jesus had his day planned. He was on his way to Jerusalem to confront death. But this extraordinary figure made him stop and completely rearrange his day. He decided not only to greet Zacchaeus but to stay in his house. Jesus had a bigger agenda than speeding along his way; he cared about people. Zacchaeus responded not by squaring the balance of his misdeeds, but exceeding it generously. Jesus says at the end of this passage that he "has come to seek and to save what was lost." He entered Jericho not even realizing at first that his goal that day would not be Jerusalem, but Zacchaeus.

We have each been on both sides of this encounter. At times we are Zacchaeus, short and desirous. We may be short on kindness, charity, or influence, and we're captivated by someone who has what we lack. We draw closer, and we receive something else, a spirit of generosity we had restrained.

Or we've been like Jesus, planning our day one way and finding it interrupted for a greater good. We probably each know people who to us seem lost. Often it's a family member. We seek them; we want to save them. We don't have many opportunities, but when one arises, we seize it at personal sacrifice because of the good it can do.

This gospel proposes how God looks upon each of us. When you see another person's shortcomings, you may feel repulsed, but God sees shortcomings and feels attracted. God knows where we are short. God seeks us to save us. Sometimes it's only after we try some wild solution that God can get our attention. It's then that we learn who we are and who God is. God loves us, seeks us and saves us whenever we are up a tree.

Sunday, November 3, 2019