

Short in Stature, Big in Heart
23 Pentecost C

"For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Last week's scriptures talked about strong egos and contrasted the Pharisee who asked nothing of God in prayer and the tax collector who asked everything of God when he asked for mercy. In today's readings we hear again a contrast between those who seem to have it all but hide the obvious poverty of their lives. Today a little man teaches us a lesson about the size of our soul.

Bill Hybel is the senior pastor of Willow Creek Community Church. One might think he has a big ego to fit a church the size of a small city. But in the back of his book, *Just Walk Across the Room* (Zondervan, 2006) Bill Hybel writes: "What if you knew that by simply crossing the room and saying hello to someone, you could change that person's life forever? Just a few steps to make an eternal difference. It has nothing to do with methods and everything to do with taking a genuine interest in another human being. All you need is a heart that's in tune with the Holy Spirit and a willingness to venture out of your 'Circle of Comfort' and into another person's life."

The back cover could read, "What if you knew that by simply crossing the road to talk to that person in a 'tree'...?"

That is exactly what Jesus does. How does he do it? How can we?

How can we rise above the ego that prevents us from doing good as Zacchaeus did was able? The little guy in our gospel story today just totally exudes ego. Zacchaeus. This is a guy, not much bigger than a Smurf, with more ego than Donald Trump but with better hair. More ego than a Category 5 hurricane. His character might be compared to Danny DeVito. And he's about to meet someone with zero ego, who's going to ask him to hang up his ego, and get a life.

We begin by noting that Jesus "entered Jericho and was passing through it" (v. 1). *Was passing through it*. Don't miss that detail, because the crowd that had gathered didn't really interest Jesus. His itinerary only had Jericho as "passing through" town, not a stop-off point or a rest stop. It wasn't like Jesus intended to stop for hummus, olives and salad in Jericho. He was passing through. Jesus loved individuals and lived in a group community, but avoided crowds.

Jesus would transform a person's life as he was passing through to somewhere else.

As Jesus was walking through town, the crowds pressed around him, blocking out Zacchaeus, who's bobbing around trying to shove in here and there. His status as the "chief tax collector" and a rich man don't mean much to the crowds waiting to catch a glimpse of this itinerant celebrity. And given that he's only 127 centimeters high, he's got this Napoleonic complex going, and it all adds up to an ego the size of Texas.

The point is that Zacchaeus thinks he is the last person Jesus is going to notice. So he does something that's high ego: He climbs up into a tree to get a better view. Just like the song you learned in Sunday school: "Zacchaeus was a wee little man, and a wee little man was he. He climbed up in a sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see." Something about Jesus made Zacchaeus curious. Did he believe that Jesus would cross the street just to change one person's life?

His ego is crumbling. He was a revenue agent of the imperial Roman government; now he's a squatty seeker sitting in a sycamore. A tree hugger. The huge sound of an ego crashing gets Jesus' attention. He encounters Zacchaeus, and he promptly invites himself over for dinner. When it came to changing lives Jesus had one set of intestines!

Jesus comes to him. Jesus approached him. Jesus invited himself into Zacchaeus' life.

The one who was a seeker is now the one who is sought.

Jesus was merely passing through Jericho on his way to somewhere else, yet ***Jesus comes to Zacchaeus.***

How often do you, or people in your life, feel as though they're up a tree — treed by any number of awkward or difficult circumstances? Probably often.

How great is it, that while up a tree, if we're looking for Jesus, he's likely to find us and say, "Come down out of that tree!"

Can you imagine how fantastic those words must have sounded to Zacchaeus? Come down out of that tree! Stop embarrassing yourself! Don't be afraid! No need to avoid your problems! Get down out of there before you hurt yourself and break something important!"

Then notice what happens. ***Zacchaeus experiences transformation.*** He responds to the invitation, and his subsequent conversation with Jesus shows that this is a sinner repentant. He not

only confesses his fiscal injustices, but his restitution is extravagant in providing for the poor and overcompensating his neighbors for what he has taken from them.

That's humility.

That's repentance.

That's conversion.

No ego here. Just a life turned around for the glory of God and in the service of others.

So, let's forget our egos, and gather up our garments and undergarments and climb a tree to see Jesus. He'll see you in the midst of the crowd.

- Let's respond to Jesus' invitation to be a part of our life;
- He's asking us to jump out of the tree to accept an opportunity to recover meaning and significance in our lives;
- He's asking us to repent of wrong practices;
- He's asking us to pay back generously those whom we have wronged;
- He's asking us to do a complete turn-around, i.e., to stop in our tracks and move in a different direction.

Jesus' invites people like Zacchaeus' despite the response of those disgusted that this wannabe messiah would spend time with a sinner.

Let's be honest. If Jesus came to our church today, whom do we think he would single out for lunch after services? The pastor? The super volunteer who is a generous giver and knows the Scriptures forward and backward?

How about the guy living with his girlfriend? The alcoholic housewife who hides her secret? The kid who stopped believing God cared after years of watching his parents fight and divorce? The

single mom who strips to make enough money to feed her kids and sits in the back row of church so people won't talk with her?

“The Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.” He comes to the despised and rejected of the church and society and he tells that one to come as he's passing by, “Come down and show me where you live. I'm going to eat with you. Today salvation has come home to you.” Amen.