

Luke 19:1-10 Sunday of Zacchaeus

“An Earnest Desire”

And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among the publicans, and he was rich. And he sought to see Jesus who he was; and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. And he ran before, and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him: for he was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up, and saw him, and said unto him, Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for today I must abide at thy house. And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all murmured, saying, That he was gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner. And Zacchaeus stood, and said unto the Lord: Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold. And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house, forasmuch as he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.

The kingdom of God suffers violence and the violent take it by force...Matthew 11:12. As an Evangelical minister that was one of a few parts of the Gospels (along with John 6 and the obvious teaching on the Eucharist), I had to simply stay away from. What in the world can that mean?! The kingdom of God suffers violence and the violent take it by force? It doesn't make sense...unless. Unless you are part of the Apostolic Church, if that is the case then St. John Chrysostom is one of your many deified Fathers and expositors.

St. John says it speaks of those who (quoting the OSB) “have such earnest desire for Christ that they let nothing stand between themselves and faith in Christ.” It is not to counter *Ephesians 2:8,9* “*For by grace you have been saved by Faith, and that not of ourselves; it is the gift of God, nor of works lest anyone should boast.*” Which Protestants have used as a biblical weapon against the ‘works’ view of salvation they perceive (understandably) as the legal view of salvation held by Rome. (Ultimately redefining salvation in Protestant legal terms).

If they had turned to the Apostolic Church, to the Fathers, they would have seen the very simple yet rich truth that while grace is indeed *from* God and *of* God, faith is *man's* desire and response to God's grace. And as such, it varies with each person. **Faith begins as the spiritual desire or orientation of the soul; and once expressed, it is the manifestation of the health of the soul.**

That being the case, when Jesus says to some (usually His Disciples) “*O you of little faith,*” (*Matt. 6:30; 8:26*) what He's saying is, your souls will never be healed as long as you do not trust and have faith. This is perhaps most graphically seen in His rebuke of Peter (right after He praises him for confessing Him as the Son of God), where he says to him, “*you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men,*” *Matt. 16:23b*). Faith and the desire for God is not where Peter's soul is focused. In that space of the “*things of men*” he will never find or please God, and therefore never heal his soul.

Conversely when Jesus said to others, as he did the Blind Man of Jericho or the Canaanite woman the Church had us consider last week: “*Your faith has made you well,*” He's revealing to them and to us: this is a healthy soul. A soul that earnestly desires God and has expressed that in an act of faith – and been healed. In fact a soul that is so healthy He was able to use it to heal the body.

The faith is a visible expression of the health of the soul, it is also a product of what that person believed and what that person wanted. And that is why it is so important to Jesus that he show this to His Disciples – and through the Gospel writers – to us.

It is as the schema-nun told me so many years ago: “nothing can keep you from God.” If you want Him you will find Him. Nothing can stand in your way if you want Him bad enough. Nothing!

Nothing physical. Not illness, as we saw with the woman with the issue of blood for 18 years. Not impairment, as we saw with the Blind Man of Jericho.

Nothing social. As we saw with the Canaanite woman who lived in a pagan land among pagan people. Or the Centurion (or Cornelius) who are leaders of not only pagans, but the most socially successful pagans in the history of the world up to that point. How could the woman find Him in the darkness in which she lived? Why would the Roman Centurions want to find Him in light of their military and political success? The same reason: they were drawn by God’s grace, they earnestly desired Him. They wanted God and they wanted Him so much nothing was able to keep them from Him.

As we read the account of Zacchaeus in this week’s Gospel we’re seeing yet another example of the kingdom of God suffering violence, of it being taken by a violent man. Like the man who cannot see, never having seen with his eyes, the Blind Man of Jericho sees with his soul. Like the woman that cannot understand with her mind, never having been taught, the Canaanite woman understands with her soul.

And like Zacchaeus that has never felt compassion, having no conscience, he feels with his soul. Like them he has such an earnest desire for Christ, he will let nothing stand (literally) in his way. Nothing will keep him from God.

As Jesus gave us the examples of healthy souls overcoming physical and social barriers through faith, so we see with Zacchaeus perhaps the greatest barrier to overcome – the barrier of self. Or to be more precise, self-love. (*philouftia*).

The Church teaches us that Zacchaeus was not merely a tax-collector, he was a chief tax-collector. A tax-collector of tax-collectors as it were. St. John describes tax-collectors and others who made more than just livings – who make wealth – from their own people as having as their treasure the tears of the poor.

Again, St. John helps us see this from God’s perspective. He says, if you want to know how much God hates greed, avarice, consider Jesus parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Lazarus was consigned to the unspeakably horrible experience recorded by Luke just a few chapters before this account of Zacchaeus, for stepping over the poor, for not helping them when he had the ability to do so. He did them no harm, but he didn’t help. Zacchaeus however not only didn’t help them either, he went immeasurable farther by not only living off them – but growing rich off them!

It wasn’t because he was rich. It was because he was rich at the expense of others. He not only didn’t help them with his riches – his riches were the very reason they needed help in

the first place. This is the reason God hates greed, hates avarice in particular. It ranks with murder in it's hatefulness.

Archbishop Anastasios of Albania (who most consider a deified elder) says that the opposite of love is actually not hate – it is ego. He teaches this because as one who has the mind of the Church, the mind of Christ, he understands love as thinking, feeling, caring for the other. Whereas the ego cares for the self only. *Philouftia* – self love.

Zacchaeus through faith climbed the sycamore tree to be with God. Nothing could keep him from God. And once he found Him, his desire for God, this *violence* he would commit to find God, healed his soul of the greatest passion: the passion of self-love, of *philouftia*.

This is why, as he receives Jesus into his house and into his life, he does the opposite of what as an ego-driven man he had done. As he made his riches off others for the sake of himself, now he is made poor for the sake of others. He gives away half to the poor and essentially the rest to those he's cheated (which is the requirement of the Law) – regardless of their means, and regardless of what it means to him. ...And he clearly has no regrets or hesitations. And in this is perhaps the greatest lesson for us.

That which he thought riches could buy, what the rich have always believed wealth could buy, is joy. It cannot buy joy, it can only buy happiness – which is temporal joy. And in fact it is usually fairly brief. It's why the rich have always gone from acquiring one thing to the other, one financial success/victory to the other. Because it just doesn't last.

But when we desire God so bad, through faith we take the kingdom of God by force, refusing to be overcome or distracted by the world or by Satan, or our greatest enemy – ourselves – we find the joy that has within it the peace that transcends understanding. It is too deep in its wisdom to be fully embraced by the mind, and it is too wonderful to be fully held in the heart of a creature, being as it is, uncreated. This joy can only be held in that place within our souls created by God for that, and only that, very purpose. And as the soul fulfills its purpose in containing the uncontainable, uncreated joy of God; the blessed person that bears this soul fulfills *their* created purpose.