

When Seymour passed away, God greeted him at the Pearly Gates. “Thou be hungry, Seymour?” saith God (Apparently they talk King James Bible translation in heaven!) “I could eat,” Seymour replied. So God opened a can of tuna and reached for a chunk of rye bread and they shared it. While eating this humble meal, Seymour looked down into Hell and saw the inhabitants devouring huge steaks, lobsters, pheasants, pastries and fine wines. Curious, but deeply trusting, Seymour remained quiet. The next day God again invited Seymour to join him for a meal. Again, it was tuna and day old rye bread. Once again looking down, Seymour could see the denizens of Hell enjoying caviar, champagne, lamb, truffles and chocolates. Still Seymour said nothing. The following day, mealtime arrived, and the now stale bread (apparently God does NOT like to waste!) and another can of tuna was opened. Seymour could contain himself no longer. Meekly, he said, “O mighty One, I am grateful to be in heaven with you as a reward for the pious, obedient life I led. But here in heaven all I get to eat is tuna and a piece of rye and in the Other Place they eat like kings! Forgive me, O Holy One, but I just don’t understand.”

God sighed: “Let’s be honest, Seymour. For just 2 people, does it pay to cook?” This gospel is once again, a lesson in Jesus’ strange view of salvation. Less is often more: Zacchaeus had the truffles; Jesus had the tuna. (adapted from LECTIONAID, Sept-Nov 2001, p. 38-39)

First, some background. In Luke’s Gospel, we are coming to the end of Jesus’ journey to Jerusalem, a journey that will end in a disastrous death where Jesus’ critics will at last have their way with Him. Just before He reaches that violent end, He passes through the border town of Jericho. There He notices a man named Zacchaeus. This man is not only a tax collector, which was bad enough, for they were collaborators with the Romans – who fleeced their own people to pay for the Roman occupation of their country – but Zacchaeus was the CHIEF tax collector. Because of his ill-gotten gains, he was probably the richest man in town.

Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but has difficulty seeing Jesus because EITHER JESUS OR ZACCHAEUS is short – the text is not clear – although we have pretty much always said that the runt was Zacchaeus. Who wants to think of the Savior as small? But in historical texts from the earliest days of the church, critics mocked the Christians’ claim that Jesus was the Messiah saying that no real Messiah would be that short. We can flip a coin based on the text. (this bit of info comes from Willimon, in PULPIT RESOURCE, Oct-Dec 2010, p. 22) I’m just going to go with what MOST people of our tradition have said because I’m going to build a homily on that– that it was Zacchaeus who was small. I hope that doesn’t ruin your day!

Zacchaeus wants to see Jesus, but has difficulty because of the crowds. He famously climbs a tree. The remarkable center of the story is not when Zacchaeus sees Jesus but when Jesus sees him. Jesus calls him down and invites himself to Zacchaeus’ home. The crowd is incensed; Jesus has gone to eat at only one person’s home on his visit to Jericho; the home of the town’s worst, and richest sinner.

And of course the reaction of the bystanders – who represent us – is predictable. They are scandalized. Remember the fuss when Pope Francis met with a gay couple when he was in Washington? He had known them in Argentina. Many people thought it scandalous. We’ve been hearing this message all year in Luke’s gospel, but it seems very difficult for us to actually ‘get it’: “The healthy do not need a doctor; sick people do. I have not come to invite the self-righteous, but sinners....” (Lk 6:31-32) Just like they grumbled about Jesus: “This man welcomes sinners and tax collectors – and eats with them.” We’re still grumbling about a Pope who goes out to the marginalized. Remember last week’s gospel: A penitent tax collector, not

an upstanding Pharisee, returns home from worship justified. (17:14) Will we go home justified today – or grumbling about the grace of God?

The central figure of this gospel is Jesus, not Zacchaeus. Jesus, the revelation of who God is and what God is up to in the world. This despised little runt, even this one who makes his living in such questionable ways, is also a child of Israel.

The charge against Jesus (in Luke 15, is that “This man welcomes sinners – and eats with them,” is once again documented. Jesus has come to seek out and to save those who are lost. What is impossible for human beings is possible for God (18:27), even the redemption of a rich, questionable character like Zacchaeus. (freely adapted from Willimon, PULPIT RESOURCE, Oct-Dec 2019, p. 15-16)

And my second of only 2 points. So where does this leave us? I said I was going with the understanding that it was Zacchaeus who was short, not Jesus. Short – lacking in height. But after his conversion, a much taller man gave back what the small man had stolen (or had been stealing). Meeting Jesus, it seems, made Zacchaeus grow bigger in stature.

That’s what goodness and grace do for us – they make us grow taller. Ron Rolheiser shares this story. A neighbor stopped by to drink coffee and chat. The neighbor was a good man from a wonderful family and had been blessed with lots of love and good example in his life. But, like the rest of us, he had his weaknesses; in his case, gossip and occasional pettiness. One day, as he was sitting with the friend, he made a very racist remark. The friend, instead of accusing him of being a racist or shaming him with the inappropriateness of his remark, called him instead to his own innate goodness: “That comment surprises me,” he said, “coming from you. I’ve always considered you and your family big-hearted people, with class, never petty or bigoted. I’ve always envied you and your family for your goodness and understanding. That remark simply doesn’t sound like you!”

The man’s reaction was instant, positive. Immediately he apologized, “You’re right, I don’t know why I sometimes say stupid things like that!” Like Zacchaeus the taller man gave back what the smaller man had taken.

It’s interesting to remember that the word ‘Gospel’ means ‘good news,’ not ‘good advice.’ The gospels are not so much a spiritual and moral theology book that tell us what we should be doing, but are more an account of what God has already done for us, in us, is still doing for us and in us, and the wonderful dignity that this bestows on us. We are sons and daughters – OF GOD! Since we are gifted in this way our actions should reflect that dignity rather than what’s less lofty and more petty inside us. Morality is not a command, it’s an invitation; not a threat, but a reminder of WHO WE TRULY ARE. We become taller and less petty when we remember what kind of family we ultimately come from – and that we are literally DIVINE children, for we are God’s.

In essence, we all have 2 souls, 2 hearts, and 2 minds. Inside of each of us there’s a soul, heart, and mind that’s petty, that’s been hurt, that wants vengeance, that wants to protect itself, that’s frightened of what’s different, that’s prone to gossip, that’s racist, that perennially feels cheated. Seen in a certain light, all of us are as small in stature as the pre-converted Zacchaeus. But there’s also a tall, big-hearted person inside each of us, someone who wants to warmly embrace the whole world, beyond personal hurt, selfishness, race, creed, and politics.

We are always both, grand and petty. The world isn’t divided up between big-hearted and small-minded people. Rather our days are divided up between those moments when we are big-hearted, generous,

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warm, hospitable, unafraid, wanting to embrace everyone and those moments when we are petty, selfish, over-aware of the unfairness of life, frightened, and seeking only to protect ourselves and our own safety and interests. We are both tall and short at the same time and either of those can manifest itself from minute to minute.

But as all know, we are most truly ourselves when what's tall in us takes over and gives back to the world what the short, petty person wrongly takes. The great mystic John of the Cross made this insight the center-piece of his theology of healing. For him, this is the way we heal:

We heal not by confronting all of our wounds and selfishness head-on, which would overwhelm us and drown us in discouragement, but by growing to what he calls 'our deepest center.' For him, this center is not first of all some deep place of solitude inside the soul, but rather the furthest place of growth that we can attain, the optimum of our potential. To grow to what our deepest DNA has destined us for is what makes us whole, makes us tall – humanly, spiritually, and morally.

Thus, if John of the Cross were our spiritual director and we went to him with some moral flaw or character deficiency, his first counsel would be: "What are you good at? What have you been blessed with? Where, in your life and work, does God's goodness and beauty most shine through? If we can grow more and more towards that goodness, it will fan into an ever larger flame which will eventually become a fire that burns away our faults. When we walk tall there will be less and less room for what's small and petty to manifest itself.

But to walk tall means to walk within our God-given dignity. Nothing else, ultimately, gives us as large an identity. That's good to remember when we challenge each other: healthy religion, healthy friendship, doesn't shame us, doesn't look down upon us, but always invites us to what's already best inside of us. Amen. (adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 8/10/2003)