

### “Come on Down!”

I once read about a beautiful ranch lake in Montana that lost its attractive splendor. The water that had been crystal clear and alluring to animals and people alike ... became covered with green scum. The ranch animals lost weight and became ill from drinking the water. Finally someone came by the lake who understood the problem. Debris, collected from the hard spring rains, had stopped up the dam and prevented the free flow of water out of the lake. The spillway was cleared and soon the lake had clean, fresh water once again.

A pure lake is not one that contains all of its water within, but one that flows out water through the spillway. The flow is necessary to keep the water pure. Human lives are that way, too; they are kept pure by flow. When one tries to hoard, to keep to oneself more than one needs, trouble arises; impurities enter and brings sickness and misery. This is also true of institutions such as churches, businesses, even government. When there is no outward flow, and every resource is kept within, there is stagnation, there is constipation, and eventually, there is death! A constant flow is vital for purity and health.

Today's Gospel lesson is the story of Zacchaeus, a man who had a “flow” problem ... a cash flow problem. Zacchaeus was a tax collector; he collected and he collected and he held on to as much tax money as he could get away with ... in truth, the buck stopped with Zacchaeus! His corrupt behavior is ironic since his name “Zacchaeus” means “pure.” Zacchaeus' actions belied the meaning of his name and he warranted the label “sinner” (vs. 7).

However, like that ranch lake in Montana, Zacchaeus knew something was wrong in his life. The impurity of greed ... the inward flow of want ... the keeping of as much as he could for himself ... eventually change his sweet taste for money into a bitter taste for life! One day, Zacchaeus learned that a teacher from Galilee named Jesus was to pass through town. Being a person of “small stature,” he climbed a tree for a better view. Surprisingly, Jesus saw him ... called to him ... and invited himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner. A good portion of Jesus' ministry happens around a table.

That dinner changed Zacchaeus' life. Somehow the debris ... the crud was cleared from Zacchaeus' life ... life began to flow outwardly again ... He promised to contribute to the poor and restore fourfold those who he wrongfully treated. He began to live up to the meaning of his name --- pure --- a purity that could only come when the debris was cleared away and the outward flow could resume.

This idea of flow-through ... flow-outwardly is central to the Biblical teaching of stewardship. We are not given things to keep, but to be caretakers over them, allowing whatever comes our way to flow through us to our benefit and the benefit of others. When we stop that flow, as Zacchaeus did, all sorts of bad things start to come about. I call this the “greed-house effect.” Just as our poor stewardship of the environment --- the pouring forth of pollutants into the atmosphere --- causes disruption in the environment, so the debris of greed and a poor stewardship of ownership cause disruption in society.

It boils down to acknowledging that the earth is the Lord's and we humans are but stewards of the earth ... not owners. And as worldly goods flow through our material affairs and budgets, it is with the thought expressed by this hymn: *We give thee but thine own, Whate'er that gift may be; All that we have is thine alone, A trust, O Lord, from thee.*

Yes, the story of Zacchaeus, the tax collector, who climbed that tree to see Jesus, is one of the most popular stories in Scripture. Children love to sing the Sunday School song about Zacchaeus, that “wee, little man.” Even adults remember him for how he responded to Jesus and did a financial turnabout, returning fourfold his ill-gotten money. Although his story is told only in the Gospel of Luke, some legends have sprung up about Zacchaeus. Here is one I found:

According to one legend, Zacchaeus arose early every morning and left his house. His wife, extremely curious at this unusual behavior, decided to follow him one morning. She watched as her husband took a bucket to the well, filled it with water, and then walked out to the town gates. He stopped at a sycamore tree. There he set down the bucket and cleared away any debris which had accumulated at the foot of the tree. Having done this, he poured the water around the roots, caressed the trunk of the tree, and stood in seeming awe. At this point his wife came out from her hiding place and asked him what he was doing. Without hesitation Zacchaeus answered: “This is where I found Christ!”

The most highly developed teachings on material possessions within the New Testament can be found in the Gospel of Luke. Interestingly, though, nowhere within Luke are the things of the material world denounced. What is denounced is the stoppage of material goods in the life of one individual who thinks they are his or hers and doesn't have to pass them along. Nearly every parable or incident follows this plot line.

The Rich Fool thought he could stop the flow and put his wealth in bigger barns and granaries. In the Parables of Dives and the beggar Lazarus, Dives is criticized not for his material abundance but for his callous disregard of the grievous need at his gate as personified in Lazarus. None of his wealth flowed out through the gate to the beggar. In the Parable of the Talents, there is the same cash-flow problem. Those who invested --- kept the flow going --- were commended. The servant, who hid his money in the ground and thereby stopped the flow, was renounced and lost his money. Luke is consistent throughout. Money is to be used. That is its purpose and nature; that is how it is redeemed from its potential danger of distracting from the Kingdom of God.

Two weeks ago, in the previous chapter of Luke, we were confronted with the question: “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” In the changed life of Zacchaeus, God found faith. In many ways Zacchaeus is just like us. He had a good income, was surrounded by comfortable living, but yet, he was not fully contented. He was the chief tax-collector, meaning he had climbed the career ladder by pushing others down. He climbed to the top of his profession by being the best at what tax-collectors did in those days ... defraud everyone they could for their own benefit. Consequently, Zacchaeus was lonely. He had chosen a way of life that made him an outcast. He thought that the more material possessions he had, the happier he would be. However, money can't buy love nor true friendship which are important if one wants to be happy. I think Zacchaeus in his struggle to be loved, as well as accept, began to search for God's love which he heard was being taught by Jesus of Nazareth. As such, I think Zacchaeus became quite determined to see Jesus. Nothing was going to stop him ... not even his height.

By most world standards, we are wealthy people. We are not simply trying to survive by acquiring the basics (food and water) like most of the world. We struggle each day with inconveniences. We live under the illusion that the more goods we can accumulate, the happier and more secure we will become. Unfortunately, we keep having these real life experiences that teach us that wealth and happiness are not necessarily synonymous. We squander our money buying dust-collectors, space-fillers, status symbols and useless items. Then we complain that we are broke ... having nothing to wear ... and feel deprived.

Any deprivation we feel is most likely spiritual. Such spiritual hunger is derived from this dilemma: do we control our wealth or does our wealth control us? Money and materials things aren't evil in and of themselves. The evil part is the love ... the lust for them. Keep in mind ... who you are as a person has nothing to do with what you have! As God's children, we own nothing ... we possess nothing. What we have are God's blessings ... blessings that are to be used to minister to others ... blessings to be used on God's behalf to meet other's needs ... blessings to give away so that others may also be blessed. What we have then are God's blessings and in turn, we are God's stewards of those blessings ... caretakers ... managers of God's property. The fact is, in the stewardship of our life, when we act with faith, we find that happiness ... that love ... that peace of mind we seek.

Zacchaeus climbed that tree, because he was determined to see Jesus. He was determined to find hope for his life. He was in that tree seeking, and as such, he made himself available to Jesus. The irony, however, is that Zacchaeus is not the one seeking ... but the one being sought. Like the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, God comes looking because every human soul is precious to God. God values each life, and each life is worth finding ... is worth saving. It is not Zacchaeus who invites Jesus up into the tree for a conversation. It is Jesus who invites Zacchaeus to come down and be with him. Because Jesus reaches out and accepts Zacchaeus as the person he is ... because Jesus cares and loves Zacchaeus ... Zacchaeus' heart is changed!

This place ... this church ... is it not our “tree” in which we come to see Jesus? Is not here where we hope to find answers to life's questions ... peace for our troubled souls ... forgiveness for our sins ... acceptance of our unique character? We come seeking, and yet, we are the ones being sought. We do not come with a clean heart, or a strong spirit. We come wanting ... wanting to be closer to God. Again the irony is ... we come because God has already moved closer to us. We may not be fully aware, but something has drawn us here and that something is God's small voice from within saying, “Come on down!” So we come ... we come not because we are pure, but because we need to be made pure. We come knowing we need something else in our life ... other than failed illusions.

For Zacchaeus, a change of life meant a change of flow ... a cash flow. Before, money flowed towards Zacchaeus and he kept it for himself ... but his life was stagnant and he was miserable. However, when he met Jesus, the money flowed away from him and he was alive like never before. The great truth here is that with giving, there is getting ... that real living is in giving ourselves away. That sounds risky and it is, but we trust what Jesus taught when he said that he came not to be served but to serve.

There are two seas in Israel. Both the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea are fed by the Jordan River, other streams and numerous springs. Indeed, the Dead Sea has a daily intake of over six million tons from the Jordan alone. Yet nothing lives in the Dead Sea, where the salinity is four to six times as great as the ocean's. The Dead Sea keeps all the water it gets. By contrast the Sea of Galilee's outflow supplies water for dozens of farming settlements. Trawlers with nets harvest sardines and larger fish from her waters. One lake keeps the other gives. The Sea of Galilee gives and lives. The other sea gives nothing and it is named The Dead!

There are two seas in Israel. There are two kinds of people in the world ... those who would see Jesus and those who refuse to

see ... those who come down and follow Jesus, and those who never bother to climb ... In this life, if you are going to go with the flow, it's better that you give and live! Amen!!