

Who's Short?

Before I was ordained, I like you, sat in the pews each and every Sunday listening to sermons – week in and week out.

And like you, I've heard sermons that have soared to the heavens AND sermons that have bored me to tears!

But I never heard a sermon that got me mad!

That is, until our Vicar at St John's by the sea preached about today's gospel lesson.

This funny and weird story of the rich tax collector Zacchaeus.

What got my goat that morning is when the priest said that this gospel story might give us the one and only description of what Jesus looks like.

Because, as you know, no one tells us whether Jesus was skinny or fat, bearded or clean shaven, handsome or homely.

It's possible, the priest went on to say, that he's short!

Because the original version of what we hear today, in the Greek, can be read that way when it comes to who "HE" – the short guy – is.

Could be Zacchaeus; which is why he climbs the tree.

Or, it could be Jesus, and Zacchaeus climbs the tree because short Jesus is lost in the crowd!

So I had this visceral, angry reaction to that priest's take on this story.

How can you twist words around to say Jesus was short?

Everyone knows — he was tall!

Good looking!

Strong!

It took me quite a while to figure out why I got so mad.

And when I did figure it out, I felt pretty silly.

Pretty chagrined, actually.

Because the nerve that priest hit was the nerve that says: "I know who and what Jesus is!"

And that "who and what Jesus is" came to bite me on the okole.

Because the Jesus I thought I knew — isn't Jesus at all.

It's just a mirror image — of me.

God creates humanity in God's own image — and we return the favor, creating God in our image.

Fr Richard Rohr says this:

"Jesus offers his teaching to Israel as an Experience.

It moves to Greece and becomes a Philosophy.

It moves to Rome and becomes an Organized Religion.

It moves to Western Europe and becomes a Culture.

And when it moves to America it becomes a Business." Id., modified.

Last week's annual convention of our diocese took aim at this oh so human tendency to make God look like us, rather than us doing the hard work to look more like God.

And so a theme of justice, reconciliation and diversity ran throughout the weekend.

We've had weekends like this before as a diocese, but one thing made this weekend different.

It was the upfront recognition of how hard it is to actually DO justice, reconciliation and diversity.

Because to actually DO these things, and not just talk about it, means for many of us, giving things up.

Like, status.

Like, privilege.

And yes, like money and power too.

It means becoming willing to really hear folks who come from different cultures and economic backgrounds and faiths.

It means holding lightly to my own sense of what makes the world tick, and nurturing a willingness to see where my way of life has actually harmed others as they try to live their lives.

Which gets us back to our gospel story today, because like me, the religious good guys are furious with Jesus!

Because he doesn't meet their expectations either.

He should not only be tall — but he should come to reward the faithful, the righteous, the good folks!

Instead, he's shamelessly reaching out to the least, the lost, and the left behind.

What kind of Messiah is this?!

We have walked with Jesus this year, from Galilee as he heads toward Jerusalem, with Luke as our guide.

Along the way, we've heard and seen how Jesus deals with the rich.

From the rich youngster who stumbles away crushed, because his stuff owns him; to the rich fool whose full barns can't buy him another hour of life, to the rich dead man begging Lazarus for a single drop of water.

So when Luke introduces Zach to us today not only as the chief tax collector, but as rich too, we expect Jesus to skewer him.

Just like Jesus skewers so many other rich folks who cross his path.

But it turns out that Zach isn't defined by his occupation.

He's not defined by his wealth.

Instead, Zach "gets it" — about Jesus.

Like St. Paul who boasts about being a fool for Christ, Zach also becomes a fool for Christ!

In those days, grown men didn't run, much less climb trees!

Yet, here's Zach, so eager to see Jesus, and so unable to see him (because either he or Jesus is short) that he runs up ahead, in full view of the crowd, and scampers up a tall tree.

Imagine for a moment if, during next year's Palm Sunday parade around the block, Lynette or Mother Imelda runs up ahead, and dangles from a tree branch as we all pass by.

The scene is ridiculous — even hilarious!!

But that's Zach!

Dangling like an apple from a tree branch!

A fool for Christ.

Jesus sees this marvelous, ridiculous, touching display of faith and invites himself over to Zach's for dinner.

And who starts to grumble?

All the good people.

People like me, who play by the rules.

Who count themselves as securely inside of God's camp.

"Who's he to eat with a filthy tax collector?" they grumble.

But Zach gets it.

And his response to the salvation that Jesus pronounces on he and his household, is NOT to give thanks that he's on his way to heaven.

It's NOT to congratulate himself that he's on Jesus' guest list.

His response is one that catches a glimpse of the new world that God, through Jesus, is, even today, creating.

It's the response to which our convention last week calls all of us.

Zach sees that the world God creates, the world God intends for us; is a world where everyone has enough.

Where no one has too much.

Where we all recognize and embrace the fact that everything we have — is from God.

So Zach's response to salvation is this:

He gives half of all he has to those without.

This is what salvation looks like!

It is our own pouring out of what we have for the benefit of one another!

Because that's what God does, through Jesus, for each and every one of us.

Paul says it like this:

"But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet; even to accepting death, death on a cross." Phil 2:7

Which puts the question about whether Jesus is short in a whole new light.

Because, whether he is or isn't, one thing is for sure:

Jesus gets down low.

Low enough to "stoop with the worst of them.

By the time he gets to Jerusalem, he doesn't have far to fall, ending up between two low down thieves, so short is he, so willing is he to get down and dirty with the lost." Willimon, Who Will Be Saved?, 112, modified.

Gandhi says of Jesus: "I think he really means what he says."

Which, when you think about it, is pretty scary stuff!

Because, if we truly take Jesus at his word, he's urging US to become fools for Christ!

Now!

Today!

He's urging us to dangle from trees!

By generously sharing what we have with the poor.

We can jump in, fearlessly.

Or we can step back, scandalized and shocked!

Jesus, always and everywhere, creates miracles out of the most unlikely people.

People like me, and you.

In today's gospel, a camel passes through the eye of a needle, as a rich man enters the Kingdom of God.

As the Messiah — who gets down low — delights in this God of love and longing and laughter.

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