

31st Sunday in Ord C
John McDermott
October 30-31, 2010

Homily

Reading 1: Wisdom 11:22-12:2
Responsorial Psalm: Ps
Reading 2: 2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2
Gospel Reading: Luke 19:1-10

The other week I went to the annual meeting of our industry trade group in Florida. One night I wound up having dinner next to the owner of a big company that grew from nothing over the past 25 years. Let's call him Mr. Fox. He was obviously very successful, so I was very keen to learn some secrets of his success. Sure enough, at one point, he made a very telling comment. He said, "Once you have achieved financial security you can control your life. Then business is just a game and you can really enjoy life with your family." "After all," he said, "what else is more important?"

The next night I went to the awards dinner with several hundred other people where we honored the retiring chairman of the trade association. He was the CEO of an even larger and more successful company. Let's call him Mr. Beaver. In his closing remarks he paused and said, "You know, I am a person who believes in brutally honest self-reflection. But looking back on all these years I cannot find anything in myself to congratulate for all this outward success. I worked very hard, but many of us work hard. In the end, I have to give thanks for knowing Jesus Christ as my personal lord and savior." You could have heard a pin drop.

Now as we listen to this story of Luke's, which one of these two men is closer to the example of Zacchaeus whom Jesus commends? Interestingly, this story of Zacchaeus is the very last personal encounter that Luke gives us before Jesus enters Jerusalem and we begin the Passion story of Holy Week. We have several stories prior to this, like the Pharisee in the Temple that we heard last week, which are images of what discipleship is *not* about. But at the end of this story, Jesus tells the crowd, "This man too is a descendent of Abraham," even though he had a lot of elements in his lifestyle that most people then would despise. So today we get a story of true discipleship that forms a

capstone to Jesus' whole journey toward Jerusalem that we have been listening to, Sunday by Sunday, since the end of June.

Let's look more closely at our friend Zacchaeus. He cares so much about seeing Jesus that he climbs up a tree without worrying about what other people will think of him. I imagine a type of Danny DeVito—you know, short, sharp tongued, and very determined. How else could you survive as a tax collector? But then, he is so proud to have Jesus in his home that he announces, "I give half of my money to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone, I pay them back four times over." We see from this brief statement that:

- He is motivated by gratitude to God; it is not about law
- He shares what he has with the poor, and so connects himself to his neighbor
- He is able to do this while remaining in his ordinary life

I was at a Stewardship Day earlier this year where I learned that the average Catholic in this country gives a little over 1% of their household income to charity. Here in Webster, where we have a median household income of \$75,000 that would work out to about \$750 in charitable giving per year. But here is a guy who is giving 50%. Is he just boasting of his intention, or is he actually living by this? Actually, Luke's text does not say, "I shall give.." in the future tense. It says, "I give..." in the present tense, as if this has been his habit for some time.

In fact, here is my problem with Zacchaeus. Obviously, what drives Zacchaeus is gratitude toward God. What else would propel a man like him to surrender control of his wallet and financial security to a higher power? But tithe five times over? What would my financial planners have to say about all this? How can Zacchaeus be a role model of discipleship to me as I try to balance the competing needs of providing for my family, their education, a reasonable lifestyle and the solving the US government deficit? So if I am really honest, there is a part of me like Mr Fox seeking financial security and control for myself and my family. And what is behind this but my very real fear of losing control over my future? In fact, however, we can never get total control of our lives and our environment. When we think we are just about there, wham! something hits us totally out of the blue and life reminds us that we are not in charge.

But Zacchaeus points us to the possibility of radical trust in God for every aspect of our life, including our finances. And included in that is the ability to open our hearts to God like Mr Beaver at the awards dinner and say, “Everything that I have has been a gift from you. It is not just because of my hard work. And now, how would you like me to set my life’s priorities?”

I mention all this because this happens to be the time of year when we talk about Stewardship and the CMA. Our good news is that, actually, at St Rita, we are in reasonably good financial shape. Thanks to Fr Chuck’s careful leadership we are paying our bills, and thanks to many generous parishioners, average giving has increased over the past several years. You can read about this in the mailing that went to your household earlier last week. Of course, we could use more funding to expand our outreach and service to others, and we have very challenging goals this year for the Bishop’s Catholic Ministry Appeal. I understand that Fr Chuck has laid in an extra supply of Roloids until we reach our goal for that.

But this is not a talk about giving to specific needs. It is about our relationship with God. If we are good stewards, each day we open ourselves to the next step of surrender to God who has given everything for us. So God has a claim on us, our talents, our time and yes, our treasure. Do we really think we will be filled with the joy of Zacchaeus if we give our 1% and keep the other 99% for ourselves and the IRS?

I would ask you to do two things. The first is during our offertory time, when we are bringing what we have to offer to God with our thanks, to really consider a prayer of surrender as the basket goes by. I suggest something like this:

Oh my God, here I am. All that I have is yours, all my time, all my talent, all my treasure. Make of me whatever you will. Amen.

Then, when you get home, prayerfully discuss and review with your family the Annual Commitment Card that came with Fr Chuck’s letter this week, and fill it out with your plan for the coming year for time, talent and treasure. Then bring it back with you to Mass next week.

Zacchaeus is the not a story of reasonable discipleship. It is over the top. But then, our gospel and the message of the cross is not reasonable either. It is the story of extravagant love, free gift and connection to our neighbor.