

Commentary to the 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time (C): His Mercy Knows No Limits



Jesus didn't intend to stay there. He was passing through Jericho. But something happened that made Him change His plans. Compassion happened. And Mercy. And Love. The little man that everyone hated, Zacchaeus the head tax collector, had climbed a tree along the road that Jesus was walking down. He was merely curious. He wanted to see this Jesus. But then Jesus stopped under the tree and said, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly because today I must stay at your house." The man with the crowds around Him hanging on His every word, saw the man that everyone avoided, everyone hated, changed His plan to pass through Jericho, and said, "I must stay at your house." Shocking. So also was Zacchaeus' reaction. He promised to give half his possessions to the poor and payback four times over all he had extorted. Jesus cared about Him. Zacchaeus would not let the moment pass. And salvation came to little Zacchaeus' house.

Have you ever been in the tree with Zacchaeus? I think we all have. I think we all have had times that our sins have separated us from the people following the Lord, but our determination to be in His Presence has led us to a place we can view Him. So we go to Church in our sinfulness, just to get away from ourselves for a few moments. And then something happens. We decide that we want to be with the Lord forever. And we seek forgiveness, and are rewarded with peace. Or perhaps we come to Church only to keep someone else happy, a spouse, or parents, or children. We don't intend to take our presence in Church all that seriously, but then we feel the call of Jesus to let Him stay with us, in our house, and everything changes.

A while ago I heard a number of talks from a great young layman named Joe Farris. Joe is a 42 year old husband and father from North Carolina who shares his deep commitment to Christ with our young people at Life Teen or Covecrest Camp, etc. Over and again Joe would say, "Lord you have ruined my life, and I love you for it." I am convinced that Joe has nailed it. That is what Jesus does. He destroys our old lives. He calls us out of the trees of our sinfulness, away from the life where He is not present. Perhaps we routinely engage in substance abuse, alcohol or drugs or whatever. Or perhaps we use others to fill our own sexual needs, moving from one conquest to the next. Or maybe we treat others with contempt and hatred. Perhaps we have bought into the materialism of our society and live for our possessions, ruthlessly doing everything possible to gain and hoard them. It makes no difference why we are in the tree. The point is that we are there. But we do not have to stay there. Jesus calls to us, and says, "I want to stay with you." If we come down from our trees then everything must change. He destroys our lives. But He gives us His Life.

Perhaps there are some who feel that the Lord would not call them down from their trees. Perhaps there are some who think that their sins are too grievous for the Lord to simply forgive them. "Father," you say, "I have destroyed people. I really went after a classmate, a co-worker. They may not recover from my wrath. I got a girl pregnant, and then dumped her. I had an abortion, etc etc." Listen closely now: Jesus is not concerned with the sins. He is concerned with the sinner. He is concerned with you and with me. He looks up into that tree and sees someone who needs Him. His mercy, and compassion and love are infinitely greater, infinitely more powerful than our sins.

Perhaps there are some who don't want to come out of their trees. They like their lives. They don't care if they are sinning. Still, you do go to Church. You have climbed the tree out of more than simple curiosity. Jesus knows the courage it takes to turn from sin. His reward is greater than the joy of the party, the stuff, the fleeting moments of sin. He looks into the person's heart and says, "Give it up, and let me in. I really do want to stay with you."

In 1880 Will L. Thompson published a song that captures the call of the Lord to the sinner. You are familiar with it. Sometimes the choir sings it. The song is Softly and Tenderly.

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling,

Calling for you and for me;

See on the portals He's waiting and watching,

Waiting for you and for me.

Come home, come home,

You who are weary, come home;

Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling,

Calling, O Sinner come home!

Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading,

Pleading for you and for me?

Why should we linger and heed not His mercies,

Mercies for you and for me?

Oh, for the wonderful love He has promised,

Promised for you and for me?

Why should we linger and heed not His mercies,

Mercies for you and for me?

Oh, for the wonderful love, He has promised,

Promised for you and for me!

Though we have sinned He has mercy and pardon,

Pardon for you and for me.

Maybe there are some people who are not in the tree. Perhaps there are some who are in the crowd following the Lord. Many of the people in the crowd were judgmental. It is so easy for Church people to be judgmental. We see someone in Church and register shock, “What is he doing here? What is she doing here?” Today’s Gospel tells us that Jesus wants us all here, those who have lived their Catholicism at all moments of their lives, and those who have just dropped into the Church to give Christ a “look-see.” He excludes no one. Nor may we.

Sometimes we are with Zacchaeus in the tree, and sometimes we are in the crowd following Jesus. But always Jesus is there for us, calling us away from sin, and calling us to join him in rejoicing over each person who has come into His Family. We pray today for the courage to accept His Presence into our lives, and in the lives of others.

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