

OUT ON A LIMB

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Grace Church in New York
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Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." (Luke 19:10)

Every so often you will hear or read stories of people whose deeds cut to the core of your soul, and remain there to fire your imagination. Perhaps you've met these people in literature. I think of the old bishop in Victor Hugo's *Les Miserable*, who saves an ex-convict from going back to prison by giving him the candlesticks he'd stolen. I think of Sydney Carton, in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, who trades places with a man condemned to the guillotine, and goes to his death saying, "It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known." Such people give the gift of salvation.

Even more noteworthy is when such people come not from fiction, but from real life. Recently I read the story of Maximilian Kolbe. Kolbe was a Polish Roman Catholic priest of the Franciscan order at the outbreak of World War Two. When the German army smashed into Poland, Kolbe chose not to flee but to stay at the monastery. There he and his fellow monks gave protection to refugees fleeing the Nazi persecution, including two-thousand Jews whom they hid in one of their friaries. The monastery was also active in publishing anti-Nazi tracts that caught the attention of the German occupiers, who arrested Kolbe and eventually sent him to Auschwitz.

Kolbe endured particularly brutal treatment at Auschwitz, all the while trying to minister as a priest to his fellow captives. One day at roll call the guards discovered that a prisoner was missing, apparently escaped. In retaliation the camp commander declared that ten others should be sent to the starvation bunker, where they would remain without food or water until they were all dead. One of those chosen was a man named Francis Gajowniczek. As he was being led to the bunker he cried out, "My poor wife, my poor children! What will they do?" Upon hearing the man, Kolbe stepped forward and said, "I am a Catholic priest from Poland. I would like to take his place, because he has a wife and children." The guards allowed it.

So it was that Maximilian Kolbe took the place of Francis Gajowniczek in the starvation bunker, where he tried to lead the other condemned souls in prayers, hymns, and psalms. Two terrible weeks later, Kolbe was the only prisoner still conscious. To expedite the process the guards administered a lethal injection, and he died. Meanwhile, Gajowniczek miraculously survived his imprisonment and the war itself. Maximilian Kolbe had saved a stranger with a total offering of himself.

In today's reading from the Gospel of Luke we meet a man who was initially nothing at all like Maximilian Kolbe. His name was Zacchaeus, and about Zacchaeus we know three things. First, he was a taker, not a giver. He was the chief tax collector in the town of Jericho. In the days of Jesus, tax collectors were extremely unpopular people. They worked for the Romans who occupied the land. The Jews hated paying taxes to the foreign infidel, and those who would stoop to collect the taxes were regarded as traitors to their own people, collaborators with the enemy. Worse yet, people assumed that the tax collectors were cheating them out of more than even the Romans required them to pay. As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would be the most despised of all; he was in charge of all the underlings who would actually go out and do the dirty work. The second thing we know about Zacchaeus is that he was a rich man. Jericho was a wealthy town, so

the chief tax collector would have had ample opportunity to increase his coffers. Finally, the third piece of information we have on Zacchaeus is Luke's physical description: Zacchaeus was noticeably short of stature.

Zacchaeus was so short, Luke tells us, that he couldn't see over the crowd when Jesus came to town. Not wanting to miss the visiting celebrity, Zacchaeus took the initiative, ran ahead, climbed a sycamore tree, and waited for Jesus to pass. When Jesus did come by with the crowd, he looked up and saw Zacchaeus in the tree, called him down, and rewarded his ingenuity by going to his house for lunch. The upstanding citizens all complained: what was Jesus thinking, dining in the house of a sinner? But it was there, in the middle of lunch, that *Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much."* The taker had become a giver. *And Jesus said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."*

So here we are on Pledge Sunday, and no preacher could possibly ask for a better Gospel passage than this as a launching pad for what we at Grace Church playfully call my annual "Sermon on the Amount." The obvious line of logic here would go something like this: we've started with the story of a man who made a 100-percent offering of himself. Next we've heard about Zacchaeus, who went out on a limb for Jesus, offered to give away fifty-percent of all he owned, and finally promised a fourfold restoration of every dime he'd ever swindled. And what is asked of us? How do we access the salvation given to Zacchaeus? How much do we need to give? Good news: not 100-percent, not fifty-percent, but a measly ten-percent. The tithe never sounded so good, did it? So let's all go climb a tree and go out on a limb for Jesus.

The problem with such an interpretation of the story is that it puts the cart before the horse; it puts our response before God's blessings; it has Zacchaeus taking all the initiative and doing all the giving. A closer look at the passage will reveal that it wasn't Zacchaeus, but the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God that took all the initiative and did most of the giving. One must wonder: what or who compelled Zacchaeus to go see Jesus in the first place? Who lit a fire in his soul, or stirred within him just enough divine discontent with his own life that he sought out Jesus? What strikes me as active here is what theologians call the prevenient grace of God. Prevenient grace is the action of God that precedes and makes possible any good work we might do or holy thought we might think. Only God can work in us that which is well pleasing in his sight. Today's Collect of the Day states this very thing: *Almighty God, it is only by your gift that your faithful people offer you true and laudable service.* It was God's gift that inspired Zacchaeus to go see Jesus. It was God's gift that impelled him up the tree and out on the limb. It was God's gift that Jesus knew his name, called him down from the tree, and had apparently already made plans to stay at his home.

Can we call Zacchaeus a genuine spiritual seeker who took laudable steps in search of Jesus? Sure we can. But even more so do we affirm that God first sought out the seeker and knew him and was acquainted with all his ways. It's not so much that Zacchaeus went out on a limb for Jesus, but the reverse: Jesus went out on a limb for Zacchaeus. Jesus went out on a limb for all of us – that limb being the hard wood of the cross, where he stretched out his arms and offered himself in obedience to God's will, a perfect sacrifice for the whole world. As we'll sing in the hymn (Hymnal 1982 #686) that gives us the theme of our annual campaign: *Jesus sought me when a stranger wandering from the fold of God; he, to rescue me from danger, interposed his precious blood.*

God's prevenient grace seeks us out and knows us. Jesus broke into Zacchaeus' normal, everyday life. Jesus made a one-hundred percent offering of himself, as Maximilian Kolbe gave

his life for his fellow prisoner. For these reasons and more we list our particular blessings on the upper flap of the pledge envelope that you find in your pews today. Let the blessings we list be large and small, mysterious and mundane, sacred and profane. Let them speak of all the ways that God has broken into your life with the love of family, friends, and pets; for the wisdom of a mentor; for the beauty of art, music, and poetry; for crisp autumn days in this crazy city of New York, for tasty foods like dark chocolate, pizza, bacon-avocado cheeseburgers, and Popeye's Chicken biscuits; for all the people in the past 170 years who have found salvation in this house we call Grace Church; for God's pledge and promise to us that nothing in all of creation, not even death itself, can separate us from his love. You can even give thanks for the times that try our souls, because in retrospect we discern God's particular closeness while walking through death's dark vale of shadows. If this is to be the "sermon on the amount," so be it. But let the amount we primarily speak of be the sheer deluge of God's blessings.

Now that we have the horse before the cart, we can talk about Zacchaeus' gift in its proper perspective. Yes, he went out on a limb literally and financially for Jesus; the amount that he gave was enormous – half of all his worldly goods. But he gave it in praise and thanks to God. He gave it in response to God for the blessings of that transforming day. As for the number that you and I write on the bottom flap of the envelope, whatever it may be, let it simply say "thank you, Lord, for all the blessings of this life." Let the number be a matter of love, and an expression of gratitude for all the manifestations of God's grace in your life.

As I mentioned before, Francis Gajowniczek survived his imprisonment. After the war he was reunited with his wife, but sadly, his children had perished. Nevertheless, he went on to live a long, decent, deeply grateful life. Every year on August 14, the day Maximilian Kolbe died, he returned to Auschwitz to pay homage to the man who saved him. In 1982 he was present at the Vatican when Pope John Paul II canonized Kolbe as a martyr of charity.

In recalling the moment of his being saved, Gajowniczek would write: *I could only thank him with my eyes. I was stunned and could hardly grasp what was going on. The immensity of it; I, the condemned, am to live, and someone else willingly and voluntarily offers his life for me – a stranger. Is this some dream? I was put back into my place without having had time to say anything to Maximilian Kolbe. I was saved. And I owe him the fact that I can tell you all this. The news quickly spread all round the camp. Another survivor of the camp declared that Kolbe's deed provided a shock filled with hope, bringing new life and strength. It was like a powerful shaft of light in the darkness of the camp. Likewise, when we survey the wondrous cross where the young Prince of Glory died, our richest gains we count as loss, and pour contempt on all our pride.*

Today salvation has come to this house, and we say thank you, Lord, for all the blessings of this life – most especially that the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.

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