

Homily for Weekend of November 3-4, 2007

By Sister Susan Severin

Wisdom 11: 22—12: 2

2 Thes 1: 11—2: 2

Luke 19: 1—10

Zacchaeus has sometimes been seen as a comic figure—short, clambering up a tree, a tax collector working for the Romans. But Zacchaeus himself does not intend comedy nor does the author. Rather this is a dramatic scene in which Jesus calls someone—a very different someone—to follow him.

“Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.” And he came down quickly, and received him with joy. Jesus says **Right now!** He also says **I must**. This is urgent, imperative. And Zacchaeus responds—**Right now!**

Here we have another instance, so often in the Gospel, of this instant electricity between Jesus and someone different:

Someone who is poor (which Zacchaeus is not)
Someone who is an outcast, disabled or diseased
A sinner
Someone who is poor, sick, or ignorant.

Jesus doesn't just say hello; he invites himself to dinner and overnight. One wonders what Zacchaeus' wife thought about the instant influx of company—Jesus and followers.

Zacchaeus speaks, a bit boastfully, but so proud, and ignoring the grumbling around him. And Jesus supports him: “Today salvation has come to this house because this man too is a descendent of Abraham.”

Jesus is speaking the message we heard in the Book of Wisdom:

“For you (God) love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made.”

God loves all:

tax collectors
prostitutes
Sinners
People who are not handsome, popular, respected
People who are despised
People who are ridiculed

Salvation comes to all.

No, Zacchaeus is no comic figure, but one of those who finds in Jesus acceptance, understanding, compassion—and challenge. Because Jesus also

says he has come to seek and to save what was lost, and Zacchaeus obviously has a way to go. He makes the promises to give half his possessions to the poor and restore payment to those he may have cheated. We don't know any more. Did he keep his promises? Did he become a follower of Jesus? We don't know, but we can be assured his life was changed, and here he is in the Gospel, while those who despised him are un-named and forgotten.

Catherine McAuley was also seen as a comic figure by some of her time. She was looked upon by Dublin society as a fool—giving away her wealth, building a home for those who were poor and despised—Kitty's Folly. She was ridiculed by her family and by the clergy.

Yet she heard God saying: Catherine, come quickly for today I must stay at your house. The house that became the House of Mercy, replicated today across the world in Mercy ministries. And it was done quickly—Ireland 1831, England 1839, Newfoundland 1842, Pittsburgh 1843, Australia 1846, South America 1856.

What is God saying to the Mercy community today? "Come quickly, for today I must stay at your house." As we move from being the Omaha Regional Community to becoming the West Midwest Community, what is our house? Where is our house?

Like Zacchaeus, we find ourselves short in stature, trying to see. We may have to climb a sycamore tree and look a bit ridiculous as we try to stay faithful to our vision and our mission.

In my work at the Institute Justice Team, I hear folks saying, asking:

Sisters, isn't it time to keep your feet on the ground and not be climbing trees? Why are you so deeply involved in working for peace, for justice for immigrants? Do you sisters support those who break laws? How can you think that God wants you to join public protests against the war, go to Fort Benning every November, lobby the Members of Congress, protest unfair labor practices and unequal pay for women, manage housing complexes, try to preserve the Earth? Sister, go back to your convent and say your prayers! Keep your feet on the ground!

Had Zacchaeus kept his feet on the ground, he would not have seen Jesus, would not have been called "to come down quickly," would not have been host to the most important visitor ever to stay at his house.

Had Catherine McAuley listened to her friends and relatives, she would have remained a nice Irish lady who did good works. She chose instead to launch out into the unknown, to answer that call she felt so strongly: Come quickly for I must stay at your house.

How are we being called to climb higher, to see better, and to come quickly? This is a moment of challenge for us, and I don't think any of us quite understands all it means. Such moments as the moment at the Laredo Chapter when the delegates passed the Public Statement on Immigration are significant, and have led us into areas we didn't really plan for. We chose to stand with and serve immigrants, who are among the most despised groups in the United States today. There will be more moments like these as we decide to go forward or stay back: Come quickly!

We continue to hear the call, we continue to climb the sycamore tree, to see the vision, and to hear the invitation: Come quickly!

And we answer: Yes!