

When I was growing up in Watertown, I would get an inkling every once in a while to climb a tree. I was curious and thought it would be great to see my world from a different perspective. It was fun, eye opening, and dangerous. It was typical kid stuff. I bring this up because the other day I was reading about a group called Tree Climbers International, based out of Atlanta Georgia, that gives adults a safe and secure opportunity to rediscover their childhood by climbing a tree. There is a certain amount of excitement and risk when one does this. Trees are living things that are constantly changing. Branches which may appear to be sturdy may well hide a rotten core under the bark that could snap with a minimal amount of pressure. Going out on a limb can be a thrill but it has its risks.

This is evident in our gospel today as we watch Zaccheaus shimmy up the sycamore to get a better glimpse of Jesus. Zacchaeus was a short man who was the local chief tax collector. There were two strikes against him right there. Not only was he at a disadvantage because of his stature, he was probably one of the most despised

men in the area. His greed left many of his neighbors in a lurch thanks to high taxes and shrinking incomes.

But Jesus gravitated toward people like him because he recognized someone who was lost and needed a new direction in his life. This kind of attention would leave Jesus open to all kinds of criticism.

Earlier in this gospel passage the religious leaders of that time heckled Jesus for being a friend to tax collectors and other sinners.

So it is any wonder that Zaccheaus would find shelter in the branches of that tree. It was safe, he thought, until Jesus approaches, looks up at him in the tree and says Zaccheaus, come down, I plan to dine at your house tonight. Zaccheaus scaled that tree to seek out Jesus and in the end it was Jesus him out.

“The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost”

This discovery became a defining moment in the life of this tax collector. He had a dramatic change of heart and those around him benefited from it. When this greedy man became generous, the poor benefited when they received half of this rich man’s

possessions. Those who were defrauded by this crooked tax collector would now receive a four fold restitution that would get them back on their feet again. When Zaccheaus was saved the entire community felt its effects.

In our lives how many times have we found ourselves up a tree and out on a limb because of our human condition and our tendency to sin. That is when Jesus comes to us and invites us to come down and experience a new way to live thanks in part to the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist. This change of direction can do wonders for us and it can benefit those around us too. All we have to do is heed the voice of our God and move.

If you travel to Jericho today you will find a giant sycamore tree that many tour guides will claim is the very tree that Zaccheus climbed as Jesus approached. Whether it is or not doesn't really matter. What is important is that Zaccheus came down and left the tree behind? What about if we take a similar approach in our own life?