

“Going Out On a Limb for Jesus”

A Dramatic Monologue Based on the story of Zacchaeus

Luke 19:1-10

Scott B. Martin November 4, 2007

I know what it means to be among the despised and to have people look down on you. No one likes to be despised. Deep down we all would like to be liked and to get along, but sometimes it's worth it. It all depends on why you are despised by others and what you've traded your respectability for. Sometimes it's worth climbing out on that limb and taking a risk. It is here that my story, the story of Zacchaeus, the former tax collector begins.

My family had once been a prominent family in Jericho. We had land. We had a big house. We had servants. People looked up to us. My grandfather lost most of it during the civil wars when the Maccabees were fighting among themselves. This was right before the Romans took over. My grandfather had the misfortune to back one of the losing sides.

We were forced to sell more and more of our land until it was almost gone. By the time my father inherited what was left there was little more than the house and land right around it, which provided barely enough to live on. By the time I came along my father had sold off almost all the silver plates, candle sticks and anything else of value around the house.

My father put up a good show. Few realized how poor we were. Of course that was one reason we had to keep discretely selling things. One thing we did still have were connections. My father knew the right people and he got on well with the Romans. So when I was old enough to begin making my way in the world my father secured a position for me collecting taxes for the Romans.

Being new they gave me one of the poorer, less desirable sections of town to collect taxes from. None the less, I was good at my job. It was said I could squeeze blood from a stone! This didn't win me very many friends among my own people, but at the time I didn't care. The Romans were happy and I soon rose in the ranks until I was made the chief tax collector for the whole city of Jericho! All the other tax collectors were under me and had to give me a cut of what they collected. Jericho is a wealthy city and soon I became fabulously rich, far richer than my grandfather could ever in his wildest dreams every hoped to be.

I bought back the land we had sold and more. Soon I had fixed up our old house and doubled its size. I had servants and slaves to do my bidding and fine cloths to wear and gold rings on my fingers. The wealthier I became the more people hated and resented me. They knew that all of the finery I wore, the rings on my fingers, the fine food that was making me pudgy, all of it had been provided by money I had squeezed from them. To make matters worse what money I didn't keep for myself I sent on to the Roman oppressors to make them wealthy and keep them in power.

I might not have been respected but I was feared. After all I could break any person in the city. No one dared confront me openly, but I could see the contempt in their eyes. Doors would close as I walked down the street. Some would even cross to the other side to avoid contact with me. The ones who didn't do this would whisper behind my back using words like: traitor, collaborator, thief, "disgrace to his people" and many words I can't repeat today. To be honest, they were probably right. I was all those things and more. It got so bad that soon the only people I could mingle with socially were my fellow tax collectors and the Romans. It got so bad even the rabbis

in the synagogues wouldn't take my money! Even my own relatives started avoiding me.

Through all of this I pretended to myself and others that I didn't care. If I couldn't have their respect I at least could have their money and at the time I told myself that was the more important of the two. You can't eat respect, but money can buy almost anything. Money is security. Money is power. Money is more intoxicating than wine, the more I accumulated the more I wanted.

The day of my rebirth arrived like any other day. I arose late. Had a sumptuous breakfast and reviewed the accounts to be checked that day. As the time for the midday meal was approaching one of the servants came running into the house shouting to the other servants that Jesus of Nazareth, the Galilean preacher and miracle worker, was passing through Jericho. He said the whole city was turning out to watch him pass by and hoping that he would stop and speak or perform a miracle. They too wanted to go and being in a generous mood, I let them go. Getting caught up in the excitement I too headed down to the main road to see Jesus, I have to admit I was curious myself to see this Jesus of Nazareth, the one we now know as the Christ. You see I had heard that he not only performed miracles but he also had a reputation for eating with tax collectors and other sinners like myself. He was indeed a very different kind of rabbi!

The crowd was so thick at the main road that I couldn't squeeze in. Three things didn't help. One, the crowd was so excited that they weren't about to let anyone get in front of them. Two, no one was inclined to let me in, being who I am. Three, I'm so short that I couldn't see over anyone else and people tended to not even see me.

I knew I had to do something if I was going to have any chance to see Jesus at all. A plan soon formed in my mind. I would run on up ahead, to where Jesus would be passing. Then to make sure the crowd wouldn't keep me from seeing Jesus I would climb up a large tree that was along the way so I could be sure and see Jesus. You might think it undignified for a man of my years and position to climb a tree like some small child, well maybe you're right, but I had long ago lost everyone's respect and I had long ago decided that I would do what ever was necessary to accomplish my goals, so up the tree I went, somewhat awkwardly I must admit. I had been a long time since I had climbed a tree!

No soon had I got up the tree than I saw Jesus coming down the road and the crowd was walking along with him. It was a good thing I had climbed up in that sycamore tree! Jesus was talking about his favorite subject, the kingdom of God as he drew near the tree. He glanced up and saw me. His eyes locked on mine. I felt like he was looking straight through to my soul. A brief smile passed over his face and he stopped. The crowd saw him looking up into the sycamore tree and they looked up to see what he was looking at. Seeing me they began to murmur the usual epithets: "There's that sinner Zacchaeus. What's he doing here?", "Collaborator!", "Thief!". Jesus couldn't help but hear them. He was right next to them.

I figured he would simply ignore me and pass on by, but the next thing I knew he shouted out, "**Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down. I have to stay at your house today.**" I couldn't believe my ears! I couldn't remember the last time a rabbi or religious person had come to my house for a meal. Upon hearing these words from Jesus the murmuring and grumbling in the crowd got louder and louder. Jesus just ignored it kept staring intently at me with an amused look on his face.

Meanwhile, I none too gracefully, was hurrying down out of the tree. I almost fell out of the tree as I reached the last branch. Somewhere on my way down something happened to me. I can't explain it. Something inside of me broke loose. My hardness of heart fell away and deeply buried faith and hope came rushing forth. Jesus' simple words, **“Zacchaeus, hurry up and come down. Today I am staying at your house.”** (19:5) had set in motion something that has not abated to this very day. In that moment I felt part of the kingdom of God and in that moment I vowed to be a good citizen of the kingdom of God, come what may.

When I hit the ground in front of Jesus I surprised even myself, blurting out, **“Look, Master, I'm giving half my property to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I'm giving it back to them four times over.”** (19:8) I could hear some in the crowd murmuring, “That will be the day!” Others said, “I'll believe that when he places the cold hard cash in my hand!” I can't blame them. Who wouldn't be skeptical? In their position I would have said the same thing!

Jesus continued to ignore the murmurings of the crowd. He took my declarations at face value and simply said, **“Today, salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. You see the Son of Man came to seek and save the lost.”** (19:9-10)

I vowed then and there to do exactly as I said and I did. It cost me most of my fortune, but I fulfilled that vow right down to the last mite. Eventually I even gave up my job as a tax collector. I didn't think it fit in with my Christian values. I didn't want to be part of the oppressive Roman system any longer and I didn't want to be in the position to cheat people. Today I'm what you might call a gentleman farmer. I'll never be as wealthy as I once was, but that's alright with me. I have enough for my own simple needs and

to give to the church and the poor. The salvation that came to my house now many years ago still gives me great joy and comfort.

I can't say that my status in the community has improved all that much. True, people were glad to get their money back and for a time they spoke well of me and commented favorably on the new leaf I had turned over since that day I climbed a sycamore tree; but now I am on a different kind of branch, now I'm a Christian and many look down on us for following Jesus the crucified one, who we declare to be resurrected and sitting at the right hand of God.

I've learned several things from Jesus. Sometimes when you go out on a limb people who despise you and what you stand for will cut it off and nail you to it! But God is faithful. God is stronger than even death. God will raise his faithful ones when the kingdom comes in its fullness. God raised Jesus from the dead and God can raise us as well. I also remember Jesus words from the cross, when he said, **“Father, forgive them they know not what they do.”** I try to remember those words when people do me wrong or whisper behind my back or even to my face. I also try to remember Jesus' courage and faith as he went out on that limb and said, **“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”**

Many years have come and gone since that day I went out on a limb to see Jesus. I've been out on a limb for Jesus many a day since. One thing I've learned is that if you go out on a limb for Jesus, and for the ones he loved, the poor, the widow, the orphan, the sinner, the oppressed, Jesus will be out there on that limb with you. If people despise you for it and start to cut that limb down, Jesus stays right with you and that makes all the difference in the world.

My grandfather use to have a fruit orchard. He use to say that the sweetest fruit was always at the end of the limb and I have found this to be true. It is when I am willing to go out on a limb for Jesus that I have found the sweetest fruit. I wouldn't trade salvation and the kingdom of God for all the treasures and accolades the world has to offer. How about you? Amen.