

Going Out on a Limb for Jesus

Luke 19:1-10 in the context of Luke 18:18 – 19:28

Zacchaeus went out on a limb... literally. The otherwise dignified, well dressed, extraordinarily wealthy little man, after jumping up and down and being elbowed aside by the crowd who had gotten there sooner, ran ahead, climbed up a tree, shimmied out on a limb. And that's exactly where Jesus first met him. Jesus walked under that Sycamore tree, looked up saw the little tax collector sitting on a branch and called him by name. "Zacchaeus," he said, "*hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.*"

Where Zacchaeus met Jesus is exactly where I hope to leave each of us today – out on a limb!

Not only the story of Zacchaeus, but all of this section in the Gospel of Luke chapters 18 & 19, is about taking risks for the Gospel and for God's Kingdom. If you have access to one of the Bibles in your pews you might enjoy taking it out and turning to Luke 18. This distinct section of Luke's Gospel begins at 18:18 with a story of another rich man encountering Jesus, this described as a *rich ruler*. Unlike Zacchaeus, who was hated and despised as a tax collector working for the occupying Roman forces, and not just a tax collector, but the chief tax collector, the rich ruler was by every standard of Judaism, a good man. He kept the law. He wouldn't have any contacts with the Gentile Romans. He had done the right things ever since his youth. He was sincere. He was apparently genuine as he came before Jesus with his question: "*Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?*" Jesus told him to sell everything he had, to distribute the money among the poor and to follow Jesus. But this was more than the rich ruler was willing to risk, so he went away sorrowing.

In 18:26-30 Peter and the disciples wonder about themselves. What about us? "*We have left our homes and followed you.*" In other words Peter and the other disciples didn't feel they were any more worthy than that rich ruler, but they had risked everything they had to follow Jesus. Jesus told them "*that there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the Kingdom of God, who will not get back very much more in this age, and in the age to come eternal life.*" (18:29-30)

In 18:31-34 we see that Jesus is the greatest risk taker of all. Jesus knew what awaited him in Jerusalem: an arrest warrant, beatings, a trial and certain death. And not just any death, but death by the cruelest of methods the Romans had at their disposal, crucifixion. Despite the almost certain horrors that lay ahead of him, Jesus was willing to risk himself, to risk pain and suffering and death for the sake of God's Kingdom, because he trusted that even in death God would raise him. Jesus was willing to risk everything for the sake of the people he had come to set free.

Following the example of Jesus' own great risk we hear two stories of people who were willing to risk everything to follow Jesus. On the way towards Jerusalem Jesus had to first pass through the beautiful tropical city of Jericho. In 18:31-43 on the outskirts of Jericho we meet a blind man sitting by the roadside begging. The blind beggar, identified by name as *Bartimaeus* in Mark and Matthew, asked the crowd what all the hubbub was about and who was coming up the road to Jericho, began to shout, "*Son of David, have mercy on me!*" Bartimaeus was willing to risk the anger and disapproval of the crowd,

who kept getting more and more annoyed at him the louder he shouted, “*Son of David, have mercy on me!*” Then Jesus stopped and listened to Bartimaeus and called him over. “*What do you want me to do for you?*” Jesus asked him. “*Lord, let me see again,*” was Bartimaeus’ reply. Jesus touched him and healed him. Luke tells us that Bartimaeus, with new found sight, followed Jesus.

And that brings us to the second story of someone willing to risk everything to follow Jesus, this morning’s Gospel story of Zacchaeus. The well healed little tax collector, his feet dangling as he sat on a branch of a Sycamore tree, eagerly looking down to see Jesus coming up the road, must have been a funny sight. In fact I bet there were more than a few that day in Jericho laughing at him. But ridicule and the possibility of falling from his perch were just a tiny part of what Zacchaeus risked that day. Later, when Jesus invited himself and his entourage over to Zacchaeus’ house, Zacchaeus risked his wealth, his livelihood as a tax collector and his future. He did so willingly. In fact he seemed to do it joyfully! Zacchaeus stood there and told Jesus, “*Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and I have defrauded anyone of anything I will pay back four times as much.*” In the Book of the Law 4-fold restitution was the return for theft. Zacchaeus not only gave away half his worldly goods he offered to accept the designation of theft for anyone who felt he had defrauded them, and to pay it back 4-fold. This is the point where Zacchaeus really, really went out on a limb!

Luke’s treatise on the risk of following Jesus doesn’t end here. It continues in Luke 19:11-27 with Luke’s version of the parable most of us know as the 10 *Talents*. In Luke’s version the coinage is not a silver *talent* but a gold *minas* (translated in our NRSV as a *pound*). One servant turns his minas into 10 more. The second servant turns his minas into 5 more. The third goes and hides his minas and gives it back to the master when he returns. This lazy slave who risked nothing is berated and the minas taken away from him and given to the one who made 10.

Over and over Luke wants us to understand the message that as Jesus risked everything for the sake of bringing us new life, if we want to discover that eternal life, that healing that power of new life, we had better be willing to risk ourselves and all that we have for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

Risk: many people have written or spoken about the need to take risks in life. William G. Shedd, a 19th century theologian, once reminded people that “*a ship is safe in harbor, but that’s not what ships are for.*” Leo Buscaglia wrote that “*the person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing, is nothing, and becomes nothing. He may avoid suffering and sorrow, but he simply cannot learn and feel and change and grow and love and live.*” The great 19th century philosopher and inventor of *existentialism*, Soren Kierkegaard, put it even more succinctly, “*to dare is to lose one’s footing momentarily. To not dare is to lose oneself.*”

So today I invite you to take a risk in order to meet Jesus and in order to follow him more fully, more deeply, more joyfully and more truly. I am inviting you to risk this (take out wallet, cash, checkbook, credit cards and stock portfolio). I am asking you to go out on a limb and risk some of your money, some of your income. Like Zacchaeus who in meeting Jesus had such a complete change of heart that he could give his wealth and his income away, I am inviting you (and I’m including myself in this invitation) to risk

trusting more of your hard-earned money to God and God's Kingdom. I am well aware that there are other charities that we all give to as a part of our giving to God and to God's work, but I believe that our giving to God through the work of the Church is the primary and principal way in which we give our tithes and offerings to God.

Many of you give generously and sacrificially of your time, your talent and your treasure. Some give generously of one or the other. Today I am inviting you to risk giving more generously of your treasure through your pledge to God through the work of St. John's Church for 2011. I am inviting you to risk giving proportionately of your income. Giving proportionately evens the playing field not based on how much we give but on what portion we give of what we have. The person who pledges \$1000 out of a \$10,000 income most generously tithes 10% of his/her income. The person who gives \$10,000 out of \$1 million may be one of the larger total contributors but is only in fact giving 1% of his or her income. We can each find ourselves in the step-chart we will receive next Sunday with our pledge card to determine what percentage of our income we have been giving and to reflect on what percentage we will risk giving. I invite you to risk giving a *significant* portion of your income. You determine what is *significant* to you. We are all invited to use the tithe – 10% of our income as the admittedly inspirational (for most of us) standard. We might even want to risk giving to God more than a tithe.

What did Bartimaeus see with new found sight that he immediately followed Jesus? What was so wonderful that Zacchaeus upon meeting Jesus felt moved to risk all his possessions giving away half of everything he owned and promising 4-fold restitution to any who felt swindled? That's what I'm inviting you to get out on a limb and find out. As the great American humorist, Will Rogers put it, "*Why not go out on a limb? That's where the fruit is.*"

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

(Internet sources of quotations: http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/show_tag?name=risk and <http://www.selfhelpdaily.com/quotes-about-risks-and-taking-chances/>)