

The true measure of a saint

Hab 1.1-4 and 2.1-4; Ps 119.137-144; 2 Thess 1.1-4, 11-12; Lk 19.1-10

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What do you consider a sign of greatness?

Many features: in former days, family, education, heroic deeds, In an entertainment age, many people rely on looks.

A related notion: height. It's a well-known fact that today a certain height gives you an advantage when it comes not just to being a model, but also to job interviews, political elections, ...

Amazing how many great American presidents have been tall: Franklin Roosevelt, Bill Clinton, even George Washington were as tall as I am or taller. Charles de Gaulle was 2 inches taller than I am. And this isn't a recent phenomenon: Richard I the Lionhearted was 6,4, the same height as de Gaulle. The great philosopher, Thomas Aquinas was perhaps 6,7. They would appear in public and people would look up to them. If they were 6.5 and also large, like the great American preacher, Phillips Brooks, people would actually stop and stare.

But, you and I know that, while height may impress, it isn't really what makes a person great. Think of some of the great shorter people of history: Napoleon and king Richard II were in the mid 5 feet range, Queen Elizabeth is only 5.4, Francis of Assisi was only 5.1, Joan of Arc was 4.11 and Mother Teresa was a mere 4.10.

But, even though these people were small, if they appeared in a crowd, the crowd will actually part the way to let them through. Why, in the case of royalty, the people used to even bow until their heads were lower than the heads of the small, great people.

If Zaccheus had been someone great, someone who had measured up to greatness in his day, even though he was short, he could easily have marched up to the crowd, and the way would have parted so that he could have stood at the front of the crowd on that day that Jesus walked through Jericho in order to see this Jesus. Instead, Zaccheus climbs a tree to see Jesus. This was certainly not a sign of greatness.

No, you see not only was Zaccheus not great in the eyes of the crowd; he was despised by the crowd. Why? Because he was a "tax collector".

Now, I realize that in our day "tax collector" doesn't necessarily have the nicest ring; no one likes to pay taxes and no one likes to have those brown envelopes come in the mail telling you that your file that you thought long forgotten is now going to be audited. But, "tax collector" today is a bit like "dentist": unpleasant but not horrible. In Jesus' day, however, it meant something much, much worse.

When I preach at Christian Reformed churches in the area, I always have in the congregation a number of people who have come to Canada from Holland. Some of them are old enough to have experienced the horrors of WWII in their native land. They know first hand of people who, when the Nazis invaded Holland, began to work for the Nazi regime: watching the Dutch people for signs of subversion, collecting money on behalf of the Germans, and administering the affairs of the Third Reich in occupied Holland. Do you what these people were called? "Collaborators". And that's exactly what Zaccheus was, and that's why he was despised. My Dutch friends knew "collaborators". They know what they were like.

Like those Dutch friends, the Jewish community is also very aware of what "collaborators" did during WWII. In fact, many "collaborators" spent their time above all looking for Jews who were to be identified, their goods appropriated, and then perhaps sent off to be exterminated. This did not just happen in Holland of course but wherever the occupying armies of the Third Reich went.

So, let's call Zaccheus by what people in Jesus' day thought of him: "collaborator". And worse, let's remember: he was a Jewish collaborator. This made him not just someone who was out to make life difficult for the Jews, but one of their own who was doing it!

Greatness? Zaccheus? The two are completely antithetical. Zaccheus is a low-life, the worst of the low-lives. His shortness is emblematic of the fact that he belongs with the snakes, the slugs, and the shameful.

But, he is about to meet someone. It will be a meeting of the lowest of the shameful with the greatest and holiest. But, it will not be without someone dying in the meeting.

And so to the meeting...

That morning, down the road leading from Jericho to Jerusalem, comes one in whom all the hopes and fears of all the years of Jewish history have been placed: Jesus. Jesus, the Messiah, the anointed one, the coming King coming to reign and in his reign ready to annihilate all evil, especially in the form of the political and economic occupiers of Israel. This is the hope of the Jewish people placed on this Jesus since the news of his strange birth, heralded by angels, and sung by his mother and his kinsmen as the deliverance and salvation of his people Israel from all of their enemies.

True, the people say to themselves as he walks down the road, he doesn't come riding on a white steed with his sabre raised, but that will happen. Maybe it will happen when he gets to Jerusalem; maybe he will ride into the city of David. Maybe now he is doing what David did, gathering around him his future army of those who are looking to rid themselves of this hated occupier. He asks people to follow him: surely he has a plan. Surely, he will enter Jerusalem in power, sit on the throne of the Roman authorities, and declare the day of God's rule and thus of God's vengeance. The people are looking for only one thing from Jesus: the sign that the rule of God had begun. And when they see it, that will be the signal for the attack on the fortresses of power. You can feel it in the air. The air is filled with the smell of vengeance and attack, of smoke and, if it had existed in that day, cordite. It is not that dissimilar from the smell in the air in some Middle Eastern countries today.

And because it is in the air, people like Zaccheus can read the writing on the wall. He climbs the tree so that he can see but not too close. He wants to see what's happening, to get the pulse of the crowd, to see which way the winds of change are blowing. He's changed sides once, and he can do so again if necessary.

And, then, his worst fears are fulfilled. He sees, but also he is seen. And he is seen by the one whom the crowd knows holds his miserable life in his powerful hands. Jesus stops, turns toward him from the road, fixes his eyes on Zaccheus and says: "Get down right now!"

Gulp.

The crowd stops. Everyone is tense, but excited, waiting for the punch-line, and they are hoping that it will be a real punch-line! Everyone is quiet, as Jesus says:

"I am going to come to your house today to be your guest for my meal"

The people are stunned. Zaccheus is stunned.

For a moment, no one moves. And then Jesus resumes his walk, but this time Zaccheus is leading the way, to his house, the house of the Jewish collaborator. Zaccheus leads the way, not Jesus' follower, but his guide.

A murmur starts in the crowd: "the Jewish messiah, our messiah, is going to the house of the "collaborator"? To Zaccheus's house? No, you must be mistaken. But that's what he said."

And as they gather around the house, hanging from the windows, the tallest among the crowd can see Jesus reclining at table in Zaccheus's house, with Zaccheus standing and waiting on Jesus. And, then, those closest to the windows hear Zaccheus make a vow to the Messiah Lord:

"My Lord, I vow to give half of all that I own to the poor and if I have defrauded anyone, I vow to give that person four times as much as what I defrauded him."

Those at the window turn to Jesus to see how he will respond. It is a generous offer, but surely it is not enough. Surely, the Messiah will demand everything, vengeance, after all his reign is coming.

Jesus responds, perhaps with a smile, and then speaks so that those who are at the window can hear:

"This very day, the salvation that I am indeed bringing has in fact come to the house of this child of Abraham"

The murmuring begins again: "Salvation? Deliverance? Liberation? To the collaborator? Impossible. He should be killed and dragged through the city streets."

But no one touches him. And after the meal, Jesus resumes his walk, toward Jerusalem, and toward what will be his real destiny: his death for the very likes of Zaccheus and the other miserable offenders, like you and like me.

From the moment that Zaccheus spoke his words, he was on the road to sainthood.

I don't think that there is a Saint Zaccheus. I checked and I couldn't find one. It's a shame, because he's the very model of what a Christian saint is, of what someone who is "holy" before God does.

For a Christian saint is not, as we often think, someone who is perfect in love of God or, as the name implies, in holiness. No, a saint is someone who is perfect in knowing just how far he or she is from the ideal that God has set before us, how far he or she is from being truly "holy". A saint is not the Pharisee who stands proud of his achievements or who asserts his holiness; a saint is like the other "collaborator", the one you heard about last week, who, from a distance beats his breast and says "Oh, God, have mercy on me a sinner".

Saints are not those who declare that they are holy and that all others need to measure up to their holiness. Saints are those who recognize that they have nothing in themselves that commends them to God, who realize just how much there is in them that separates them from the love of God... and who realizing this turn to the only one who can make them holy, who can make them pure, and who does so in his dying for them.

Sainthood has no human limits. It is not limited to a particular gender, or financial state, or race, or religious creed, or sexual orientation... if by sainthood we mean not my self-declared righteousness but my sinfulness -- both in what I do and in what I fail to do -- and my willingness to turn to God, to be forgiven, and to learn of God. As Paul declared, all have sinned and fallen short, but God has mercy on all who turn to him.

And it's true as well of our communities, our families, even our marriages. My marriage is not built on the assertion that Rachel and I are perfect or have a perfect marriage. It is built on the assertion that we have much in every way to learn, and that we so often fail... but, we have one to whom we can turn to ask forgiveness and to learn how to do better. Marriages built on some sort of presumption of perfection or holiness or integrity will fall. Why? Because pride always goes before a fall, be it male pride or female pride, white pride or black pride, heterosexual pride or gay pride.

Zaccheus was certainly not proud of who he was but the people outside of Zaccheus's house certainly were. And when their Messiah failed to live up to their expectations, they were among the first to cry out for him to be killed and dragged through the streets.

Zaccheus's generosity that results from his encounter with Jesus is then not the end of the story, just the beginning. It is the beginning of a long road for this collaborator. He had to return to his job at his toll station. He had to face the Jewish crowds who wanted vengeance. How would he respond? What would he do? How will he live out his sainthood?

We don't know. But, we do know this: if he faced the crowds and his Roman masters as someone who had begun to learn from Jesus what real holiness meant, he would start as children do who start to learn how to walk. He would make mistakes, lots of them. He would need a family around him of some kind that would begin to love and accept him rather than seek his demise. He would need to learn how to speak a new language of prayer, seeking from the Spirit of God guidance for how to live his new life. And he would need to go on repenting and being forgiven.

And, I believe that he would also realize very quickly, in less than one week -- for it was only one week later that Jesus would be crucified on the cross for him -- that he had been given an incredible gift from that tree. He had met the Lord who one week later would die for him and for all those other saints out there -- and in here! -- those people who were honest enough to admit that they were not on God's side and that their lives needed to change.

He had been given a gift that you are all offered here this morning: to hear the words of Jesus saying "I'm coming to your house, as your guest, and this is your house, and it is my house. And here I'm offering you life". And you have the opportunity to come forward to this table and to commune with Jesus as he offers you in this His house and your house, his very body and blood for your salvation.

So my question to you this morning:

Will you stand tall at the window and complain about those within, proclaiming your own self-righteousness, or will you take your place here, admitting that you have failed God and those around you in so many ways -- ways that you alone know --, and receive from Him the new life that He offers you?

I invite you: don't presume to stand tall, but take your place here. For here, before God, penitent and forgiven, is where we will find the true measure of a saint and the true sign of true greatness.