

Weekend of November 2-3, 31st Sunday of Ordinary time

1. I think that I've given up on resolutions, especially New Year's resolutions; and when it comes to Lent, well let's just not go there. Too often I set the bar too high, which almost always guarantees failure, or partial failure on my part.

And yet, the idea of setting goals for personal improvement puts before us the idea of dramatically instance, think of someone who does a cannonball in a swimming pool; it's not an Olympic sport, but you have to admit that there is something beautiful in seeing someone totally committed to making the biggest splash possible. Such a diver, we might say, is all in.

All in. It is a phrase signifying a total commitment to a course of action; it is a high wire act without nets, a couple in love deciding to marry, a golfer hitting a ball over a sand trap in the hopes of winning the tournament on the final hole.

Such radical commitments are not the normal decisions we make each day, when the risks are not so great and the rewards are not so memorable. To be honest, few of us could stand the pressure of living on the ragged edge of "all in" decisions on a regular basis. But occasionally we do face those few and crucial moments that demand us to go "all in." And it is how we respond to those moments, those commitments that shape our lives, our character and our legacy.

I remember a friend from Ashland who was a popular insurance salesman making a ton of money for his boss. He was often away from home and at one point in his life, he had to decide if he was to continue driving all over Oregon for his boss or to strike out on his own. It was a difficult decision because with five children, he had serious financial obligations. Well strike out he did and now 4 of his sons are running 2 offices of his firm. In that business adventure, Ellis was "all in."

Think back on your life. What have been some of the "all in" moments that you have faced so far? Did you seize them or waver? Did you shrink back in the face of the risk, or did you take a deep breath and plunge ahead into the risky future ahead? And if you did go "all in," what made you take such a risk?

2. Before we go there, let's look at the life of Zacchaeus who was willing to go "all in" when confronted by Jesus. Now here was a man with a difficult past.

First of all, we know that Zacchaeus was indeed short in height. This may not seem like an important detail, but recall how rarely the scriptures gives us any description of someone's physical characteristics; consequently when we do get such a description, we should sit up and take notice. Isn't it odd that we know more about Z's appearance than we know about what Jesus looked like?

In any event, Zacchaeus is described not just as short, but as very short; the Greek word in the original text was "micros," from which we get the word "microscopic." And so just imagine what it must have been like for Z growing up! All his life he would have been the victim of insensitive jokes about his height; he would have been pushed around by neighborhood bullies; and then as a teenager, he would have been shorter than the girls whose attention and affection he wanted for his own...and so Z grew up living under a cloud of resentment and insults as he struggled to live in a world of giants.

And so possibly in order to compensate for the lack of his physical size, Zacchaeus learned how to be a ruthless business man, stemming from the isolation and loneliness of his childhood.

If so, he would not be the first, nor the last, person whose bruised adulthood began with a childhood trodden underfoot. But fortunately, he made a choice not to remain bruised.

3. Secondly, he knew that Zacchaeus was rich, very rich.

Recall that the Roman way of collecting taxes was by assessing a certain amount of money from a particular district, and then choosing local men to collect those taxes; and unfortunately, Rome didn't particularly care how much over and above their assessment that these tax collectors actually kept for themselves—furthermore as chief tax collector, Zacchaeus would have received a cut from each of the tax collectors under his domain—resulting in great personal wealth.

The Jewish people despised all tax collectors, but those like Z who were Jews were especially contemptible because of their unjust extortion of money from their own people, as well as because of their cooperation with the hated Roman overlords. Barred by Jewish law even from the synagogue, tax collectors were associated with all things unclean.

Now this is when this scenario with Z starts to get interesting. Recall that Jesus often challenged the rich as to how they used their resources and since Z was a rich, dishonest and non-practicing Jew, his neighbors--the very ones who were being over charged by him for their taxes--would have expected Jesus to really lay into him. When everyone, including Z, is preparing to hear Jesus hurl a "hell-fire and damnation" curse upon him, Jesus does the unthinkable, and for some, the unforgivable: he invites the worse sinner in town, this sawed-off shyster of a man, to share a meal. No one, and I mean no one, saw that one coming...

And then instead of yelling at him, Jesus offered Z a chance to redeem his life and in doing so, offered him God's grace. Certainly Z had done nothing to deserve nice words from Jesus, but here it is important for us to remember that this is a story about grace and grace, we simply do not earn.

But wait, this story is about to take yet another twist! At dinner, surrounded by a crowd of dumbfounded disciples, joyous sinners and murmuring religious folk, Z stood and announced to Jesus that he had decided to do something outrageous, something uncalculated and something generous. This tax collector, who had cheated everyone in town, pledged to repay anyone he had wronged four-times the amount, and on top of that, he would give half of his worldly goods to the poor. Surely he would have little, if any, portfolio left after that! As an aside, I wonder what the wife was thinking when she heard this announcement? Or his spoiled children?

Anyway, notice that he did not do this because Jesus asked him to or demanded it of him. This was simply his exuberant response to his unmerited welcome and acceptance by Jesus. He did not become outrageously generous in order to earn Jesus' favor because he had already received that. This is certainly an example of repentance at its' finest hour!

4. Understand that grace changed this man's life. Z's life-style gave him and his family many comforts and luxuries, but then he was also a prisoner who needed to be set free of these ill-begotten goods and Jesus' love for him did just that. And so once again, we are invited to witness God's grace at work.

By witnessing Z's acceptance of this opportunity to reform his life, our attention is drawn to a fundamental truth: an encounter with Jesus is indeed life-transforming.

Conversion is never the arrival point of Christianity; it is always a starting point. And that's part of the reason why becoming part of a church is so important. From the very beginning of the human experience, religious longings have required an institutional form.

We need each other: we need the uplifting of a shared liturgy, a shared fellowship, a shared call to serve. At some point, we must recognize that as stewards of God's kingdom, we are challenged to give some of our precious time in order to build up that kingdom. To give of our time, not so as to impress others with our generosity, but to give of our time in order to make other people's lives more manageable because that is simply the right thing for kingdom people to do.

Regardless of how personal our faith may be, it cannot possibly be private and still survive. Remember that not even Jesus was a spiritual Long Ranger going off on his own. He was a product of the Old Testament church and then heralded the dawn of the New Testament Church.

5. Unfortunately, we are often resistant to giving ourselves ever more deeply to Jesus. And so when we chose distance over intimacy, we should realize that we are losing yet another opportunity for grace to invade our lives. Perhaps if I don't feel as close to God as when I was a child, then I should ask myself--who moved? To be sure, the question before us is: how do I regain a desire for such intimacy?

Actually, it is not enough for us to be satisfied with having an interest in God, we were put here on earth to make a commitment to him. For instance when it comes to exercise, many people have an interest in it, but only those who are committed to exercise do so when convenient and inconvenient. The truth of the matter is that we need to move from an interest in God to a commitment to him.

And to this end as a point of self-discovery, why don't we think of coming to church today with us being the ones climbing a tree and with us being the ones open to Jesus taking over more of our lives? Hearing God's word helps us to see ourselves more clearly, but then once again we need to ask ourselves if we are only satisfied with just a glimpse of Jesus?

In order to be in a serious relationship with him, Jesus must be someone happening in my life. Again, being a Christian isn't a solitary affair.

6. We can't stay in the tree and just savor Jesus' words and actions and then not allow them to radically change us. The real estate folks have it right; it is all about location and what Zacchaeus' story shows us is that the most important location in our lives is when we seriously and whole heartedly encounter Jesus as our Savior and friend.

Such a moment is a moment of grace. Eventually Z saw that the people around him were not competitors to be squashed or weaklings to be exploited; as a result, that is when he finally understood that those people were the very sources of his wealth and that he could leave the world blessed, instead of scarred, by his life. What a beautiful opportunity Jesus gave this man! Makes us think about what we are doing with our own lives, doesn't it? And so what is it: when it comes to Jesus, are we "all in" or are we willing to wait for yet another invitation...