

Our Mission Is Not Complete
by The Reverend Canon Durrell Watkins , MA, MDiv
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THE PROCLAIMED WORD

My great-aunt Gladys, bless her heart, was a bit of a gambler. One day when she went to her bank to deposit her winnings from video poker and she bet the teller \$50 bucks that in 24 hours he'd have a butterfly tattoo on his backside. The teller said, "I can't take that bet; it will never happen." Indignant, my great aunt said, "Young man, I am a faithful customer of this bank and if you won't indulge a loyal customer in this simple pleasure I'm afraid I'll have to take my business elsewhere!" To quiet my irrationally annoyed relative, the teller took the bet and thought no more of it, until...

The next day Aunt Gladys returns to the bank, to the same teller, and she has her priest with her to witness the transaction. The teller says, "How may I help you today?" to which my great aunt answered, "You may turn around and drop trou for us to see your butterfly tattoo." Embarrassed, the teller said, "Lady, I don't have a tattoo. I didn't get a tattoo. I will never get a tattoo, not there, not of a butterfly, not ever." Again, quite perturbed, my aunt scolded him, "You can't possibly ask me to take your word for it! I have \$50 riding on this and I need proof." The teller spun around furiously, dropped his pants and raised his shirt to display tattoo free flesh. Just as the teller pulled up his pants and turned back around to face my Aunt Gladys again, he saw the priest shove an envelope into her coat pocket and storm out. Worried that he had made a terrible mistake, the teller said, "Did I offend your priest by dropping my pants?" And Aunt Gladys said, "No dear, he's just a sore loser. I bet him \$100 I could get a nice young man to moon a grandmother and a priest."

I hope you don't think my colorful aunt to be a wicked sinner, though you will have noticed that in the gospel reading Zacchaeus is judged to be a sinner. As a Chief Tax Collector he was seen as sort of a traitor to the people he had to shake down. He represents a system that people found oppressive and intrusive. And so he is called by his detractors a "sinner." They undoubtedly can quote chapter and verse to justify their harsh judgments. And yet this "sinner" has a faithful heart! And Jesus responds to that faithful heart.

This so-called sinner is one whom Jesus embraces. Not only does Jesus go into Zacchaeus' house, he invites himself. He says, "Zacchaeus, get out of that tree and be my host. I'm going to be your guest today." Jesus doesn't merely tolerate Zaccheus, he seeks him out and initiates the friendship!

Jesus doesn't condemn the one other religious people had condemned...Condemnation is not Jesus' way; the Apostle Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans that there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ!

Not only does Jesus not condemn Zacchaeus, but he invites himself into his home, and into his life. Religious arrogance will tell you who is beyond the reach of God's love, but Jesus has no time for that. He walks right up to those whom religion has condemned and starts making friends.

Of course, religious people had something to say about it. They grumbled, "That Jesus has gone to stay in the house of a sinner." But this so-called sinner says to Jesus, "I'll give away half of what I own." Such warmth, such generosity from someone who was supposed to be a horrible sinner! Zacchaeus also promises to make amends to anyone he has cheated in his business dealings. It is Zacchaeus, and not his religious critics, who demonstrates Jesus' Golden Rule. And Jesus affirms him.

Why must this story have been so important to those who first heard it? We must remember...the writer of this gospel is not following Jesus around recording events as they happen. Luke's gospel is written decades after Jesus' crucifixion. It is written years after Jerusalem and its Temple are destroyed by Rome. The writer we call Luke is piecing together things he's read in Mark's gospel, and from another source, and he's adding in stuff he's heard from oral tradition and he doubtlessly uses his own imagination as well. He is remembering and applying the stories he has read and heard to his own life's story. And in the life of the writer of this gospel, Jerusalem has been sacked. The Temple has been razed. And life for his community has become very difficult...and in that setting he puts these words in Jesus' mouth, "I have come to reclaim and recover what was lost."

What good news this must have been to people who had lost so much. If you have ever lost hope, you know how dramatic and dynamic and miraculous it is to have that hope restored, recovered. The people have lost so much and to THESE people Luke tells a story of Jesus saying, "I've come to seek and to save what was lost." Those words must have penetrated the very souls of the people who first heard them, like a spiritual balm soothing the deepest aches.

To people who had been judged to be rabble rousers and riff raff, how encouraging it must have been to see Zaccheus the social pariah, embraced by Jesus. Others have called him a sinner, but Jesus calls him a friend. What a powerful image that must be to people who have had their hope hijacked and their dignity denied!

In his gospel, Luke has shown us a shepherd going after the lost, wandering lamb. Luke has shown us the woman who tears her house apart looking for that one, lost coin. Luke has shown us the parent who welcomes a lost child home with no questions asked. And now Zacchaeus, written off by others as a sinner, is seen by Luke's Jesus to be a kind and generous person of integrity and so we hear Jesus say, "this is why I'm here...to find and affirm and build up and welcome and praise and love those whose sacred worth and value and dignity have been overlooked."

The lamb could not get away from God's love. The coin could not get away from God's love. The prodigal child could not get away from God's love. And though tossed aside by the judgments and condemnation of religious people, Zacchaeus could not get away from God's love! Luke's message, from beginning to end, is clear and consistent...no one is beyond the reach of God's love.

The Church has too often used God's name in vain, saying that its hatred of those who are different is simply fidelity to God's will. But blaming hatred on the God that is Love is the worst sort of blasphemy. And yet, there are those within the Christian community who are willing to declare that human prejudices are not divine. There are now congregations, like Sunshine Cathedral, who will stand up and say that whenever the Church has used scripture and religion to control, shame, or exclude, we have erred. We are ready to redeem our faith and let it now be a symbol of hope and healing and inclusion.

Jesus' message is: OTHERS have said you were a sinner; I am saying you are my friend. By seeing the dignity and sacred value in every person, we are calling forth the best in each person. When given an opportunity, Zacchaeus demonstrated his faithfulness. When embraced and included, he was suddenly free to be his best self.

It's two millennia since this story was first written, and the Way of inclusion that Jesus demonstrated, the Truth of God's unconditional love that he preached, and the Life of hope and empowerment that he wanted for all people are still needed today. There are still people who have been shunned, condemned, abandoned and they need to hear that there is a place for them where they will be free to be their best selves.

Isn't that why we are here? Not just to enjoy a nice worship space or the company of good friends. Those blessings are wonderful, but they aren't enough. Zacchaeus was rich and successful, but it wasn't enough. He needed to believe in himself and he needed to give of himself. And Jesus offered him both opportunities. Here at the Sunshine Cathedral, Jesus continues to offer those opportunities.

Until every person who wants to bring their doubts and their thoughts and their feelings and their hopes into their faith experience learns that there is a place where they can do just that...our mission is not complete.

Until we have offered hope and encouragement to people on every continent by means of the internet and other media...our mission is not complete.

Until every person with AIDS, or cancer, or MS, or depression, or diabetes knows that regardless of conditions they are whole and are made in the image of God...our mission is not complete.

Until every person in the leather community knows that they have a spiritual home at Sunshine Cathedral...our mission is not complete.

Until every same-gender loving person knows that God IS LOVE and WHOEVER lives in love lives in God and God lives in them (1 John 4.16)...our mission is not complete.

Until every victim of the homophobic venom that is spewed from preachers' pulpits and political platforms knows there is a safe place where they will be honored and celebrated for who they really are...our mission is not complete.

Until we offer a progressive, positive, practical alternative to everyone who has been wounded or excluded by the pugnacity that poses as religion...our mission is not complete.

Until every transgender person knows that God loves them as they are and as they discover themselves to be...our mission is not complete.

Until people of all races and ethnicities, various religious traditions, women and men, heterosexual and homosexual and bisexual know that all of who they are will be welcome in this place...our mission is not complete.

Until every Jamaican knows that there is a community of faith that will stand with them as they work for justice for all people in their culture and country...our mission is not complete.

We are here to seek and to save all who have been excluded, ignored, left out, pushed out...and our mission is not complete.

Will you commit to the ongoing mission of Sharing the Light with the World? Will you dare to believe in yourself and give of yourself to make this a house of prayer for ALL people? Can we work together to be the presence of Christ in our world? If so, then as Jesus said to Zacchaeus, right here and now salvation is happening in this house! This is the Good News. Amen.

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THE AFFIRMING WORD

I believe in myself today!
I am willing to give of myself today.
God's Love is at home in me.
I am wonderfully blessed.
I am blessed in mind, body, and affairs.
And as one who is blessed...
I will bless others.
I am the Light of Christ.
I am sharing the Light with the world.
And so it is!

THE FINAL WORD

In *A Path With a Heart* Jack Kornfield writes, "It is through our own strength of being, our own integrity, the discovery of our own greatness of heart that we bring freedom to our lives and bring it to those around us as well."