

## Out on a limb

Patricia Datchuck Sánchez | Nov. 2, 2013 | Spiritual Reflections

Earlier this year, news outlets reported that the Internal Revenue Service may have been targeting certain individuals and organizations and subjecting them to unnecessary audits. Given many people's less-than-positive attitude regarding taxation, this news evoked quite a bit of criticism and many a negative remark. But the aversion to taxes is not a new development. Through the centuries, many have commented on this necessary but often unwieldy burden. Will Rogers suggested that the system of taxing people and their property was primordial. In his 1949 autobiography, he wrote, "Noah must have taken into the ark two taxes, one male and one female, and did they multiply bountifully! Next to guinea pigs, taxes have been the most prolific animals." There can be little doubt that tax collector Zacchaeus, who is featured in today's Lucan Gospel, was not a very popular person. For this reason, the fact that Jesus singled him out and invited himself to his home is all the more remarkable.



Jesus' entire missiology was remarkable, as the Lucan Gospel quite eloquently shows. Jesus did not avoid those with whom others refused to associate; he purposely sought them out. His inaugural promise was to preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, to give sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free. From there, Jesus reached out to lepers and paralytics (Luke 5; 17), slaves, widows and sinful women (Luke 7). He cured demoniacs and hemorrhaging women and raised dead children (Luke 8). Valuing people more than Sabbath rules, he healed a crippled woman and a man with dropsy (Luke 13; 14). While others tried to silence and shun the needy, Jesus sought them, healed them and restored them to society. In doing so, he brought to life that love and mercy of God that are celebrated by the author of Wisdom (first reading). The Lord and lover of souls who watches over all created beings became incarnate in Jesus so that we might know and experience God's unlimited goodness. Having experienced God's goodness and love in our own lives, we are thereby called to extend that same experience to others, especially the poor and those who are alienated from society because of their chosen profession (like Zacchaeus) or lifestyle, because of illness or economic status, or for whatever reason. Of course, it would be easier to live and let be, but our belonging to Christ demands that we risk reaching out when others will not.

In his fine commentary on today's Gospel, Fr. William Bausch suggests that the Zacchaeus narrative challenges us to follow the tax collector's example and go "out on a limb" in order to meet Jesus and minister to him in

those with whom Jesus chose to identify: the hungry, the homeless, the sick, the imprisoned, victims of injustice and the poor (*Once Upon a Gospel*, Twenty-Third Publications, 2008). When Zacchaeus climbed a tree to see Jesus, and when Jesus called him down and invited himself to his home, bystanders grumbled -- but this did not deter either Jesus or Zacchaeus. Nor should we be deterred by what others might think or say.

Although it is unfortunate, many good deeds have gone undone because we place too much importance on our status in the eyes of others. To strengthen us against such cowardice, Bausch cites John Greenleaf Whittier's poem "Maud Muller." While working in the field, Maud met a handsome young judge and offered him a drink of cool water. Their attraction to one another was strong and instantaneous, but because they came from different social classes, neither dared breach their societal rules. Later, both wed spouses and endured hard and loveless marriages. In one of the final stanzas of their story, Whittier notes sadly, "For of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been!'"

These are words Zacchaeus never had to speak because he risked going out on a limb to see and be seen by Jesus. For his efforts, for his repentance, for his sincere desire to make restitution and for his outreach to the poor, Zacchaeus was assured of salvation. His courage challenges each of us to do likewise.

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