

June 27, 2010

ADDING LIFE TO YOUR YEARS

“For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” Luke 19:10

Some years ago, a Ziggy cartoon showed Ziggy walking past a store window. In the window was a large sign that read: “Eat Yogurt – add years to your life.” To which Ziggy said, “If it would add life to my years, I’d be interested.”

This is a great parable for us and it is precisely what the Zacchaeus story in Luke 19 is all about. Zacchaeus knows that something is missing from his life. There is an emptiness deep down in his soul. Even though he has become a wealthy man through his tax collecting practices, he is not happy. He is unsatisfied and unfulfilled. He is thirsting for something more, so he comes to Jesus looking for the answer and he finds it, or better put, Jesus finds him!

What a great story this is! It’s a brief story about a man’s encounter with Jesus, but it dramatizes the good news of the Christian faith. It reveals the Gospel’s openness to all sorts and kinds of people, and especially its impact on a life and on a community. And it demonstrates the meaning of Jesus’ statement in Luke, “I have come to seek and save the lost.”

But what really makes it a great story is its relevance to our time, and the images of ourselves and those we know that can be found in the life of this man, Zacchaeus. We see the image of those who are willing to sacrifice everything to get ahead, to be a success, to achieve position, power, and wealth. The story also reflects how meaningless and unfulfilling this kind of achievement can be.

In Zacchaeus we discover the kind of restlessness that many of us have in our lives, that haunting feeling that causes us to cry out: “Is this all there is?” Zacchaeus found that even when he got all that he thought he wanted, it did not bring him happiness or a sense of really being alive. Many others have made this same discovery.

His adventure to see Jesus was really a search for meaning and a search for life. And he must have wanted it desperately, because he took the risk of being ridiculed and climbed up into a tree to get a glimpse of Jesus.

What was it that attracted Jesus to him? What was it that made Jesus interrupt his journey to Jerusalem to spend some time with Zacchaeus, a tax collector and outcast in the people’s eyes? Was it the awkwardness of a grown

man up a tree? Was it the quiet desperation in his face or the lack of life in his eyes?

We don't know what Jesus saw when he looked at Zacchaeus, but evidently, when Zacchaeus looked into the encouraging eyes of Jesus, he saw the new life he could have; he saw the new Zacchaeus he could become; he saw the Zacchaeus he was meant to be.

We don't have all the details, but we do know that Jesus stopped, Jesus invited, and Zacchaeus responded. We don't know what they discussed in Zacchaeus' home; we only know that Zacchaeus was dramatically changed in his attitude, lifestyle, morality, generosity, and in his care for others.

Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly." That's what this story is all about. In Jesus, Zacchaeus found life and found it abundantly.

Isn't that what Zacchaeus was looking for? And isn't that what we are looking for? Wouldn't you like to not only add years to your life but also life to your years? Zacchaeus wanted to really live before he died, and I have a feeling that many of us can relate to that. That's why the Zacchaeus story is so important to us. Zacchaeus' encounter with Jesus underscores the ingredients needed to add life to our years.

FIRST OF ALL, TO ADD LIFE TO OUR YEARS, WE NEED A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. It is crucial to have a spiritual dimension in our lives, a vital connection with the divine, or more simply put a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

Zacchaeus realized that something was missing in his life. For all that he had achieved and accomplished, he still felt unsatisfied and alone because there was no spiritual dimension in his life, no connection with the eternal and no relationship with the Creator.

In reality, life is made that way. We were created by God and for God. We are not just citizens of the physical and material dimension; there is something within each of us that cries out for more than this. We are not made to be satisfied nor fulfilled by only the human dimension. And yet we persist in trying that and thus, sadly, we remain discontent. Augustine proclaimed it long ago: "Our heart is restless, until it rests in Thee."

Zacchaeus realized his heart was restless. But he knew what to do about it. He went to see Jesus and found in him the answer to his emptiness and received a spiritual dimension, a vital connection with God and, therefore, life.

A famous actor was visiting with friends in a small town and his friends wanted their neighbors to meet the actor, so they had a party to introduce him to the people of the town. At the party, someone asked if the actor might perform for them. It was such a pleasant and eager group that he consented. He did some selections from Shakespeare and some parts from Broadway plays in which he had performed.

A retired minister, who was a close friend of the family, was there. Someone asked if there were something he would like to hear the actor do. He said there was, but he probably did not know it. The actor overheard and asked what it might be. The minister responded, "The Shepherd's Psalm, the 23rd Psalm." The actor said, "As a matter of fact, I do know it. I will do it, if after I finish, you will recite the Psalm for us too." The minister was reluctant, but the crowd was encouraging, so he agreed.

The actor began and it was beautifully done. His diction was perfect and his presentation was precise and eloquent. When he finished, the crowd applauded for several minutes. Then it was the minister's turn. He started hesitantly, but he got caught up in the depth and personal meaning the Psalm had for him. He remembered how throughout his ministry God had been there to shepherd and guide him. He remembered how just a few months before, he had journeyed through the valley of death in the loss of his dear wife and how God's presence had been his strength, comfort, and hope.

When he finished, there was total silence and tears were in many eyes. Then the veteran actor came over to the minister. He put his arm around the elderly pastor and said quietly, "You see, my friends, there is a difference here; I know the Shepherd's Psalm, but my friend here knows the Shepherd!"

To add life to our years, we need to know the Shepherd and have a spiritual dimension and a vital connection to God.

SECOND, TO ADD LIFE TO OUR YEARS, WE NEED A HEALTHY REGARD FOR OTHER PEOPLE. It is vital to live a life that reaches out with love for others.

The most evident and outward result of Zacchaeus's experience with Jesus is that his life focus changes from himself to others. He is now concerned about his neighbors, his relationship with them, and their needs. Zacchaeus learned the hard way that looking out for number one was a self-defeating and lonely existence. He found that life was best experienced in reaching out to others.

David Woodyard, in his book *To Be Human Now*, has a chapter on the contemporary obscenities of life. He writes that the primary obscenities today are not pornography and foul language (bad as they are), but rather they are disengagement and dispassion. We make life obscene by our lack of involvement with one another and our simply not caring.

Let me ask you a question. When do you feel most alive? Isn't when you are doing something worthwhile for someone else? When you love others more than yourself?

There is an old story of two monks who are on their way back to their monastery when they are caught in a violent snowstorm. Struggling to make it back, they come across a man who has fallen and injured himself and is almost frozen to death. One of the monks tells the other that they must help get this man to the monastery or he will die in the elements. The other monk says that they cannot make it carrying the injured man and that they will all die. But the first insists that he will help the man, while the other decides to go on and save himself. The monk who stayed behind to help struggled and carried the man through the storm. Just before reaching the monastery, he tripped over a frozen body. It was the body of the monk who went on to save himself. The weather had overcome him, but the monk who helped the frozen man made it because his struggles and labor of carrying another had kept him from freezing. Jesus said, "Those who love their life lost it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:25).

Jesus was right, wasn't he? This is the way life works. We experience life best when we have a healthy relationship with God and a healthy regard for other people.

THIRD AND FINALLY, TO ADD LIFE TO OUR YEARS, WE NEED A HEALTHY REASON TO HOPE. It is so important in life to have something to look forward to, something to hope for, and something to put your trust in. Because of Jesus, Zacchaeus had something to look forward to each day.

We all need hope. We all need something to look forward to. We need the ability to move into the future without fear or dread, because if we lose hope in the future, our life in the present becomes powerless, empty, stagnant, and desolate. As Christians, we have hope because we have the promise of continual new beginnings, fresh starts. We have the hope that nothing in life now and forever can defeat us. Hope is the spirit that raises us up when life knocks us down.

The Apostle Paul writing to the Christians in Rome expressed that hope powerfully: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?....No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.....(for nothing) in all creation.....will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:35, 37, 39).

When Paul Azinger, the pro golfer, was going through his battle with cancer, he was experiencing one of his darkest moments and was really feeling sorry for himself. His good friend, Johnny Miller, came to visit him. Paul shared with Johnny all that he thought he could accomplish and achieve if he could just get healthy again. Then he broke down and began to cry. Johnny Miller reached over and took hold of his hand and said, “You know, Zinger, what really counts in life is not what we accomplish or what we achieve, but rather what we overcome.”

Hope in Christ promises us that we shall overcome. It is hope that gives us life even in the midst of life’s most difficult circumstances. Also, as Christians, we have an eternal hope that our destiny is in God’s hands.

We do not know what the future holds, but as Christians and followers of Christ, we do know who holds our future.

Would you like to add life to your years? Remember – to add life to your years, you need a healthy relationship with God, a healthy regard for other people, and a healthy reason to hope. And guess what? You don’t have to climb a tree to receive these gifts!

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