

Homily for the 25th Anniversary of Priestly Ordination
of Rev. Jeffrey R. Keyes

October 29, 2016

Most Rev. Steven J. Lopes

There is something altogether right about the image of Zachaeus in the treetops as the Gospel scene for our gathering to give thanks to God for the great grace he has bestowed on the Church through 25 years of priesthood. I am sure that, over the course of these years, our good friend, Father Keyes, has found himself more than once clinging to a few spindly branches, craning for a glimpse of the Savior. Sure, the story of Zachaeus is not one usually associated with vocation and ministry. But perhaps it should be. The story of this man "short in stature" capture so well the restless human desire for God, and the halting, bumbling way we go about trying to glimpse the divine. The somewhat bizarre scene of Zechaeus in the treetops becomes an image not only worthy of contemplation by the priest, but captures the vocational striving for holiness of each and every one of us disciples of the Lord today.

Who among us, like Zachaeus, having heard the idea of Christ, the notion of God, the fame of salvation has not wanted more?

Who among us has not experienced the restlessness of holy longing, to see and know for ourselves what so many others seem to see and know so easily? Who is this Christ of whom they speak? What power has he to change the world, and can that power change even my world?

Surely, each of us, from time to time, has felt small and short of stature, insignificant amidst the great sweep of human history. Who among us has not experienced the youthful idealism that once said you *can be anything, do anything*, give way to the colder realities of daily living, to work that feels more a grind than a passion, to disappointment and even failure? Oh, I assure you, priests are not immune from this feeling either! And yet it is often enough disappointment and the shattered illusion of self-sufficiency that push us to seek the God who draws us beyond our limitations and weakness to embrace the all-sufficiency of His grace.

And, if we're being honest, who among us cannot in some way trace in our own lives the shame of Zachaeus, the inescapable fact that, as he scrambles down that tree to

meet his Lord, he must acknowledge himself as a sinner, presenting himself not in his finest moment, but one who has cheated and wronged many of the same people standing around him in that crowd? Why, when we look back on our lives with the true hindsight of faith, grace seems to work most when we are weakest, and God shows himself nearest to us when we are perhaps furthest away?

It may not be a parable in the strictest sense, but the Gospel story of Zachaeus sure raises a lot of questions and insights for the disciple, should we wish to consider it. But, as valuable as this spiritual exercise surely would be, limiting ourselves to tracing our lives in the person of Zachaeus would only be to go half way. Ultimately, this Gospel story, like all divine revelation contained in Scripture, is not about us. It's about God. Scripture reveals the Father, and the truth it contains *about us* is in service to that revelation, that we might better know, love, and serve the God who first knows and loves us. The restlessness of the human heart laid bare in Zachaeus finds its answer--the only answer--in the transformative encounter with Christ Jesus the Lord. That encounter, and not the treetop, is, after all, the climax of the story.

The Lord calls to Zachaeus, bidding him to come down from that tree. Already this is Revelation! It is the Lord who takes the initiative, the Lord who calls. We need not go seeking after the divine, as if access to God were the prize in some cosmic treasure hunt. The Gospel, mercifully, is not some tortured Dan Brown novel, but rather reminds us, again and again, that long before we desired God, the Father desires us. It is the Father who not us together in our mothers' wombs, molding us in his own image and likeness so that by our very nature we would know how to seek the true, the good, and the beautiful.

Long before we set out on search of the divine, it is the Father who seeks us out, calling our Father Abraham to follow him into a Promised Land, sending our Father Moses to lead us from slavery into freedom, endowing our Mother Ruth with wisdom to teach the people justice, and, in the fullness of time, drawing out from a simple, beautiful maiden named Mary the "yes" that would herald the dawn of the world's salvation. The history of God presented to us in the Bible has been a relentless pursuit of man, a constant stretching-forth of his mighty arm to bring about human happiness, a happiness only to be found in intimate communion with him who is himself the wellspring of life and light. He knows that apart from him we can never be truly whole, truly happy, truly the children he created us to be. The whole sad lot of history, the alienation and brokenness, the lies and violence are not because God desired to remain hidden, but

because we hid ourselves from him, repeating in every time and in every place the sin of Adam and Eve.

The Lord says to Zachaeus: make ready, for tonight I will dine in your house. The call of the Lord leads immediately to intimacy and communion. Notice that the Lord does not first quiz Zachaeus on his catechism, nor lead him in an examination of conscience. In his love and mercy, the Lord simply draws near, enters into relationship with him, and that changes everything. That encounter with the burning love of the Sacred Heart pushes Zachaeus headlong into a renewal of his faith and a desire to get his moral house in order...not out of fear, but because of love. Isn't this what the whole Year of Mercy has been about, understanding that the true motivation for sound Christian faith and upright living is the merciful love of God and not fear? God never tires of seeking us out, but it is not enough for him to find us. He then desires to dwell with us, in the intimacy of communion.

Again, the history of God presented to us in the Bible has been a relentless pursuit of man, a constant stretching-forth of his mighty arm to bring about human happiness which is only to be found in intimate communion with him. If we do not experience that kind of intimacy, then perhaps we ought not look to God as the problem, but examine our own consciences to see what might yet be within us that inhibits that relationship. The Lord reveals his intention to dine with us. The Gospel leaves the choice to Zachaeus and to us whether or not to open the door when he comes.

But for Zachaeus, the encounter is transformative. Because of the authentic revelation of divine love and mercy he experiences on that day, his contrition bears fruit in conversation and his selfishness is transformed into generosity. Zachaeus is no longer a disciple, but an apostle who by his changed way of living announces the good news of the world redeemed.

This is perhaps the context in which we might best view the gift and mystery of priesthood we celebrate today with Father Jeff Keyes. Jeff is a man who encountered the merciful love of God and, happily for us, allowed that love to transform every aspect of his life in the grace of Holy Orders. The discipleship he learned from his family, which he lived as a musician, to which he bore witness in his friendships--that discipleship was transformed into apostleship in and for the Church. It is not longer just a personal witness to the power of divine love that he bears, but in sacramental conformity to Christ the Head of the Body which is the Church, he is in his priesthood public revelation.

When Father Jeff pours water over the head and, faithful to the command of Christ, speaks *I baptize you*, it is the Lord himself who baptizes, who saves, who grafts a new soul into his ecclesial body. When Father Jeff speaks the words of absolution, God's love and mercy triumphs over sin and division. When he calls down the fire of the Holy Spirit upon simple gifts of bread and wine, the offering is completely consumed, and in its place is left the pledge of immortality, the Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity of Jesus Christ.

Through this man whom God has called, and with whom God has chosen to dwell in the intimacy of sacramental communion, the saving words and actions of our Lord Jesus Christ are made present for a new age and to a new generation of disciples. But those words and actions lose none of their power, none of their effect through the mediation of priests. Indeed, that Christ calls men to share in his priestly office and, empowering them for ministry is but another example of that relentless pursuit of men and women revealed on every page of Sacred Scripture.

It is right, therefore, that we gather to praise God on this jubilee of one of His priests. Our praise is thanksgiving for the saving grace of the Sacraments given us by the hands of priest. Our praise is rejoicing, to see our friend and brother, Jeff Keyes, return from an encounter with the Lord so transformed that he can teach and preach in the very name of Christ. Our praise is also hope, for in the grace that Jeff was given, we can see something of the dignity and grace God intends in some measure for each of us.

So, dear friends, cling no longer to a few spindly branches, craning for a mere glimpse of the savior. Do what Jeff did 25 years ago, and what he tries to do every day of his priestly life: come down, confess your sins, open your hearts and hear the Lord's invitation to intimacy spoken to you. It will change everything.