

3 November

An old Irish priest tells the story of a man who came to him seeking some advice. 'Father, is it a sin if I took a few planks of wood from my employer that he probably had no intention of using?' 'Did you ask him permission?' 'No', replied the man. 'How many did you take?' asked the priest. 'A few' replied the man. 'How often?' asked the priest. The man replied, 'Over a few weeks'. The priest asked, 'just a few weeks'. 'Well', replied the man, 'it really became a few months'. 'So' replied the priest, 'we really are talking about quite a bit of timber'. 'Yes', replied the man. The priest responded, 'Well you asked my advice. Seeing that you took it without asking his permission and the quantity involved, yes it is a sin. And I recommend that you give it back to him'. The man replied with an absolutely straight face, 'Father, that's going to be a bit difficult. I used the timber to build my son's house!'

The challenge of giving back. I love the story of Zaccheus. This little man is not exactly the most popular person in town, being the local tax collector and somewhat wealthy. But he was anxious to meet Jesus and to do so, he climbs the tree to catch a glimpse. And Jesus notices this man in the tree and calls out to him. 'Zaccheus, come down. Hurry, because I must come and stay at your house'. This encounter is a moment of revelation for Zaccheus, in fact, it is a life-changing experience. Jesus is criticized for spending time with someone who is known as a sinner. The audience is judgmental, Jesus brings grace and healing and Zaccheus has a major change of heart. At the end of the day, that's what true conversion means, a radical change of heart.

So radical is this change of heart, the genius of the story is in the mathematical formula. Zaccheus states that immediately he will give half his property to the poor. So, if he had one million dollars, half is now given away. Not only that, but if Zaccheus has cheated anyone, he will pay back four times the amount. So, if he cheated someone out of \$1,000, he will pay back \$4,000. If he cheated a few people in his life, Zaccheus probably doesn't have much money left. But that is not the moral of the story. The moral of the story is that his encounter with Jesus is so life-changing, is so transforming that Zaccheus is almost excessive in his generosity to the point of probably sending him broke.

He is abundant in what he returns. Why? Because Jesus is abundant in his mercy, in his joy, in his healing and in his description – ‘today, salvation has come to this house’. Jesus has come to seek out and to save what was lost. Zaccheus has been saved. Because of his encounter with Jesus, his life has changed in a radical way. The mercy of Jesus is abundant, it overflows and it is the central theme of Luke’s Gospel, Jesus going out in search of the lost, the broken, the marginalized, those judged harshly, those who are excluded.

The power of God is shown in mercy. While everyone else had judged Zaccheus harshly, Jesus calls him by name, invites him to come down from the tree and sit at table with him in a gesture of love and communion. Here, grace and mercy abound and Zaccheus is touched by the loving healing of Jesus. Hence the almost reckless way Zaccheus wants to be repay those he cheated and give half his money to the poor. To be a disciple of Jesus involves a radical change of heart. No one is beyond the boundary of God’s merciful and abundant love. All of us are called to live generous lives that imitate Jesus in his mercy, healing and forgiveness. We are witnesses of that which we receive. And what we receive from God, repeated over and over again in the scriptures, is the abundance of his merciful love. Zaccheus knew this and responded generously. What will our response be?