



# FURROW

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“Zacchaeus,  
come down  
from your tree”

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Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and he was a hated tax collector for two reasons. *First*, because he collected legal taxes in Jericho for the occupying Roman government and, *second*, because he collected additional illegal taxes for himself. Zacchaeus was, therefore, a rich man. He was also a small man, small enough that he could not see over the heads of those in front of him in a crowd. And there was going to be a crowd, for Jesus the miracle worker from Nazareth about whom everyone was talking was coming to town and Zacchaeus badly wanted to see him. Scouting his options along the route Jesus would take into town, he found a solution to his problem: a tree. If he climbed up into the tree, he would be able to see the miracle worker without any problem. Into the tree, therefore, he climbed.

Zacchaeus congratulated himself for his cleverness, for as Jesus walked into town Zachaeus could see him as clearly as the crowd along the road. He could see even better than most of the crowd. He could even, if he wanted, reach down and touch the miracle worker as he passed. No reaching down was necessary, however, for when he reached the tree Jesus stopped and looked up. Zacchaeus, he said, “make haste and come down, for I must stay at your house today” (Luke 19:5) and have dinner with you. Luke adds that “he made haste and came down and received him joyfully.” We suggest that not only did Zacchaeus make haste to come down from his tree but that he actually fell out of the tree in astonishment that Jesus, who must surely know what kind of an avaricious man he was, would want to stay at his house and eat with him.

Zacchaeus was not the only one astonished. The crowd of onlookers was also astonished, murmuring among themselves that “he has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner” (Luke 19:7). In that culture at that time, eating with someone meant

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accepting him; sharing a meal with him meant sharing also his life and activity. The onlookers, therefore, were scandalized that Jesus would share a house and a meal and an acceptance of such a hateful man. They were so focused on seeing the miracle worker and so distracted by hoping to see one of his miracles that they forgot the *real* meaning of the miracle worker's life. That has not changed today in Jesus' Church where the murmurers and naysayers still do not understand what Jesus was and is about: "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" (Luke 19:10).

Zacchaeus, however, *understood*. He understood he could not accept the gift of reconciliation that Jesus was offering him by his presence in his house and at his table and keep living the way he had been living. "Behold, Lord," he said, "the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold" (Luke 19:8). That promise, if carried through, would quickly make the rich man a poor man. Jesus responded to it and promised in response: "Today, salvation has come to this house" (Luke 19:9). Zacchaeus is no longer an outcast, outside the pale, but once again a beloved member of the family of God. The point of Luke's parable, of course, is that *we* too will be restored to membership in the family of God if, like Zacchaeus, we respond to the invitation Jesus issues to us.

Zacchaeus' experience with Jesus is one example of a common biblical theme that describes our experience with God as an experience of *gift* and *response*: first, God's self-gift to us followed by, second, an invitation to do to our neighbours what God has done to us. The theme is emphasized in the Jewish code of Deuteronomy. What is it God does, it asks, and answers that "he executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing" (Deut 10:18). What should those who believe in God do, it then asks, and answers that they should do as God does, namely, "love the sojourner, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt" (Deut 10:19), and God offered you the gift of deliverance from Egypt. This is the foundation for the Jewish law of hospitality which Jewish Jesus would make a major cause for salvation or damnation in the judgment discourse reported by Matthew. "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me ... as you did it [or did it not] to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it [or did it not] to me" (Matt 25:35-46). In the New Testament, the theme of God's invitation and our response is channeled through Jesus, whose disciples are invited to respond to his gifts to them with a life modeled on his life of service. "This is my commandment," Jesus instructs his followers, "that you love one another *as I have loved you*" (John 15:12; see also Mark 12:28-31).

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Zacchaeus came down from his tree, which we suggest means that he transformed his life from a life of sin to a life of being like Jesus, experienced Jesus in that most human of mutual acceptance, sharing a meal together, and responded by indeed transforming his life from a life of avarice to a life as follower of Jesus. Zacchaeus’ experience is not the normal experience in the New Testament. The normal experience is the one summed up in the parable of the Good Samaritan. There a lawyer asks Jesus “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” (Luke 10:25), and Jesus responds by telling him “go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37), as did the Samaritan who showed love and mercy for the man he found beaten on the roadside to Jericho. Paul puts it a little differently and more boldly, as is his wont: “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1). Our invitation is always to imitate Jesus to inherit eternal life. Zacchaeus received that invitation, not verbally as did the lawyer and Paul’s disciples in the cases we cite, but by being with Jesus face to face and accepting him in normal human situations. It is a safe bet that the majority of Jesus’ contemporary disciples will not receive any verbal communication from him, but like Zacchaeus they can be in his presence by faith and mutual acceptance in countless normal human situations. In that faith-filled presence, like Zacchaeus, they can get Jesus’ non-verbal invitation: “Go and do likewise.”

Zacchaeus’ model of gift and response offers an *alternative* to the one we were taught as children in Catholic schools, which was a model of *obligation* and *obedience* to the will of God. That obedience to the will of God is exemplified for Christians in Jesus’ death on the cross for the sake of God’s people, and Jesus’ obedience to God’s will serves as exemplar for the obedience of Christians to God’s will and the dedication of their lives for the love of their neighbours. Obedience to God’s will, like the obedience of Jesus, will lead them to lay down their lives, metaphorically or in concrete reality, for their neighbours. As *children*, this model of obligation and obedience was obscure to us and, therefore, not very helpful. As *adults*, we are comforted and motivated by Paul’s insight: “When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child; when I became a man, I gave up childish ways” (1 Cor 13:11). The story of Zacchaeus invites us to give up our childish ways and to live the Christian life of an adult, and suggests the way we might do that. That way is the way *not* of obedience only, though obedience will be a part of it, but of personal character and relationship.

The model of *relationship* embraces a fuller, more comprehensive Christian life than the model of obedience to God’s will. It is fuller and more comprehensive because it involves the whole Christian

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person, physically, intellectually, imaginatively, spiritually, and not merely his/her behavior. It is more in keeping with Jesus judgment that “out of the heart of man come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery ... envy, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man [and a woman]” (Mark 7:21-23). It is critical, therefore, to get the heart right, and that is precisely what Zacchaeus did. He got his heart right by *relating* face to face with Jesus and embracing him to transform his life, as real relationship always does. Any woman or man who has ever been in a relationship of genuine love will understand how wonderfully true that is.

The introduction of the word *love* raises the question of what that word means. In its contemporary usage it means a strong affection for another person, frequently a passionate affection for another person of the opposite sex. When we find the word in our Bible, it is easy to assume that it means the same thing. But it does not. When we read the great commandment, therefore, “You shall love the Lord your God with all you heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Deut 6:5; Mark 12:29-30), it means not only interpersonal affection, but also mutual loyalty, mutual service, and mutual giving way one to the other. When we read, therefore, of God’s love for Israel, we are to understand those *four* virtues, mutual affection, loyalty, service, and giving way. When we think of a genuine human loving relationship, perhaps the relationship we call marriage, we are to think the same four virtues.

## CHRISTIAN MARRIAGE

The apostle Paul instructed his Roman Christians that every other commandment was “summed up in this sentence: you shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Rom 13:9). It is an instruction that still holds true today for Christians, and especially for married Christians. We are to give affection and faithful love or loyalty to our spouses. In these days of prevalent disloyalty and divorce, *loyalty* is an important virtue. So important is it that the Roman Rota, the Supreme Marriage Tribunal of the Catholic Church, ruled that, if steadfast, loyal love is lacking in the beginning of a marriage, that marriage is invalid and can be annulled. The writer of the Letter to the Ephesians instructs husbands to “love your wives as Christ loves the Church (Eph 5:25)”, and we can be sure he intends the same instruction for wives. How, we ask, did and does Christ love the Church? He loved and loves the Church steadfastly and loyally, so much so that he “gave himself up [to death] for her” (Eph 5:25). Christian spouses, therefore, are to love one another steadfastly, loyally, faithfully. Christian marriage is

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indissoluble because the Christian love that is to sustain it is loyal and faithful.

In a marriage between Christians, spousal love demands also mutual service one to the other. Christians are anointed in baptism for the imitation of Christ, who came “not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10:45). In such a servant marriage, there is no master, no mistress, but only two servants seeking to be of service to the other. In this life of loving, loyal service they encounter not only one another but also Christ daily, become one with one another and Christ, and thus come to holiness. Paul teaches his Corinthian converts another important characteristic of marital love, namely, it “does not insist on its own way” (1 Cor 13:4). Rather, it seeks to give way to the other as much as possible, so that two persons might become one person, as the biblical phrase “one body” (Gen 2:24) intends. There are insecure individuals who for their own false security must always get their own way; there is no place for such individuals in a Christian marriage. That is not to say that there is no room in marriage for individual differences, for such differences accepted and lovingly dealt with enable spousal and marital growth. It is to say only that a spouse who insists on getting her/his own way always, who values the domination of the other spouse, will never become one with anyone, perhaps even not with herself/himself. In a Christian marriage, loyal love requires not insisting on getting one’s own way but empathy and compassion for the needs, feelings, and desires of one’s spouse, and a giving way to those needs, feelings, and desires when the occasion demands it in response to loyal and faithful spousal love.

### CONCLUSION

One *final* comment about Zacchaeus, he is fundamentally *changed* by his meeting with Jesus. After meeting Jesus, the man who was an avaricious lover of money and took illegal paths to enlarge his holdings of it is moved to promise “Lord, half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold” We are led to believe that Zacchaeus had defrauded lots of people, including lots of poor people, and what he now promises is enough to make him poor too. The gift of Jesus and the salvation he offers is so momentous that Zacchaeus is moved to respond in kind. It is always so with gift-giving and receiving; both giver and recipient are changed. *Marriage* is a good example of how this happens. When we give and accept the gift of faithful spousal love, we are changed, we become a different person, and we act differently. That change develops and grows as our spousal love becomes more rooted and faithful until it reaches the point

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when we would not even consider turning our back on it. That change becomes ever more active and evident if and when we have children. Our plans and our priorities, our hopes and our fears are different as parents than they were as new spouses. Neither the spousal nor the parental change happens automatically. We may experience a deep-rooted resistance to giving way to a spouse or to a child. If we persevere in faithful, loyal love, however, the roles of spouse or parent can become our deepest identity and we will hear loud and clear what Jesus said to Zacchaeus: “Today, salvation has come to this house” (Luke 19:9). That proclamation in our lives will surely bring us down from our individual tree.

**Sisters of Cluny.** In 1823 the founder of the Sisters of Cluny Order, Blessed Anne Marie Javouhey travelled to Freetown on the invitation of Governor McCarthy. During her time there, she worked with the freed slaves and the sick at Connaught Hospital. Forty-three years later, on 23rd January 1866 four Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny arrived in Sierra Leone to establish a mission there. Two of the four were Irish, Srs. Emilien Kearney and Edgar Sheridan. For over 156 years the Sisters of St Joseph of Cluny have been active participants at many levels of community life in Sierra Leone, particularly in the fields of education for girls, health education and women’s development generally. They have served in schools on Bonthe Island, in Freetown, Moyamba, Makeni, Magburaka and Kono, and still serve in the country. Their schools have been frequently commended in official reports for the quality of the education provided. Recognising the dedicated and distinguished work in education and development carried out by the sisters, two of their members, Sr Mary Sweeney and Sr Teresa McKeon, were awarded the highest award from the Government of Sierra Leone, the Order of Rokel.

– SIERRA LEONE IRELAND PARTNERSHIP, *Leaves from the Cotton Tree*, Dunsany, Co. Meath, 2022. p. 137.