

Don Grant

Sermon Title: Reaching New Moral Heights, Taking Leaps of Faith

Scripture: Luke 19:1-9

Video Shown Before Sermon: <http://digg.com/video/ten-meter-tower-psychology-experiment> (0:15 to 1:50).

Let me ask you a question. When you enter a sanctuary like this one for the first time, what do you notice or look for? Maybe it is the altar and how it is arranged. Perhaps it is the seating arrangement and whether the chairs are stationary or mobile. Or if a sanctuary has them, you might examine and study the stained glass windows. Those are some of the things that catch my attention and I suspect catch some of yours as well. But there is one thing I cannot help but look for that probably is of little interest to you and that is whether the sanctuary has a balcony. I always check to see if a sanctuary has a balcony.

You see I grew up in a church that had a small balcony in the rear, where on special occasions people would stand up there and perform. And I will always remember one Christmas eve service when my mom, who was a very accomplished singer – voted one of the best sopranos in the state of Ohio, in fact – sang a song titled “Sweet Little Jesus Boy” from that balcony. I can envision it now.

Unfortunately, for my mom, things didn’t go so well. Perhaps because the acoustics were a little odd up there or something, but about 15 seconds into the song, she began having trouble staying on key. And so, she abruptly stopped and started again. Things were going better but about 30 seconds into the song she began

to have the same problem. So, she stopped and tried again but with the same result. Finally, she went ahead and sang the whole song, never quite getting on key, and when she finished tears were running down her cheeks.

While she was singing, I was seated there in the front row with my back to her, thinking to myself this cannot be real, this cannot be happening, this has to be a dream, please make this a dream. But it was not a dream. I heard people mumbling things like “I came here expecting to hear a good singer.” Some kids my age were snickering. Others craned their neck around to look up and stare. Have any of you been with a highly trained singer after they bomb? Needless to say, it is not a pleasant experience and it was a long, long drive back to our home that Christmas eve.

I not only think of my mom when I envision that balcony, but the story I just read about Zacchaeus up in a tree. How many of you learned the song about Zacchaeus as a child at VBS? I did too. We had a guy posing as Zacchaeus up in the balcony as we sang the song. Do you recall how it goes?

As it was explained to me, the point of the song was that if we try to rise above our problems, Jesus will see us and come to help. Our VBS teachers were also careful to point out that the story did not apply just to short adults or people who climbed trees, but everyone because we are all wishing to have a better life. We are all like Zacchaeus. It was an interpretation that resonated with me at the time, because like with most children, I harbored some anxieties about how life would turn out and felt it was difficult to get noticed in a world of adults.

It also made me curious about why people attend Sunday services other than out of habit or to chit-chat with friends. What problems are they trying to overcome? I am still curious. As I look out on you, it dawns on me that I have no idea what brought you here today. I am not sure why you came... It could be that you came to see me bomb, but I suspect you have more serious reasons, things you are trying to rise above. We are each like Zacchaeus. The difference, though, is that we are perhaps a little better at disguising what we are striving to overcome.

Anyway, I got older and eventually read the actual story about Zacchaeus. And I discovered that an important detail had been left out of the song I was taught. Do you know what it is? It is the crowd. The song makes no mention of the crowd. I learned not only was there a crowd that Zacchaeus was trying to look over, but that crowd despised him because he was a wealthy, tax collector. By omitting that detail, the song led me to believe that once you began your ascent, once you sought to rise above your problems, religion just involved you and Jesus or you and God. It really did not make any difference what others did or said.

But I now know that simply isn't true. That's not how it works. What others do and say can make a huge difference. It certainly made a difference when my mom was up in that balcony. As she began to falter and her human frailties became impossible to conceal, others looked back at her with sneers and blank stares, further eroding her composure and self-confidence.

Nor is there anything in the text that suggests that if you seek out help or experience a change of heart that others will support or

embrace you as Jesus did. The text says nothing about how the crowd responded to Zacchaeus' promise to repay others or how it treated him after Jesus left. I think it is fair to assume that many, if not most, in the crowd continued to be suspicious and resentful of Zacchaeus. Indeed, as scary as it may have been for Zacchaeus to ascend that tree and put his shortcomings literally on public display, his descent from the tree must have been even more frightening for he would be returning to a community that knew and hated him. And there is nothing in the text to suggest that we the readers, you and I, would have received him any differently.

Indeed, what I think this story is really suggesting is that not only do our aspirations to live better lives greatly hinge on the support of crowd members, but we are the crowd. That is, others like Zacchaeus, who are striving to reach new moral heights and are poised to take leaps of faith, depend on us.

Unfortunately, we live during a time when few seem willing to take on such a responsibility.

Take, for instance, those who subscribe to the popular philosophy of "you do you." They suggest that our chief obligation is not helping others but to be ourselves, do what is best for us. Likewise, leaders of some of the world's wealthiest countries today tell citizens they can no longer afford to help others without jeopardizing their own quality of life, suggesting that self-interest, looking out for number one, is not only natural but desirable. Their response to the Zacchaeuses of the world is largely one of indifference.

Others distance themselves from those in need by organizing their lives around movies, TV shows, sporting events, video games, celebrity gossip and other forms of entertainment. They live the life of the spectator. When they come across desperate people like Zacchaeus, their inclination is to sit back, reach for some popcorn, and watch them make spectacles of themselves.

Still others either reject religion or, if they belong to a religious community, criticize the spiritual pursuits of those outside their tribe. In their minds, individuals who turn to the holy are delusional and out to manipulate others or can never meet their standards of purity. They hope such seekers as Zacchaeus take a long, hard fall and thus get what they deserve.

Indeed, very few of us seem prepared to support those like Zacchaeus wanting to rise above their past and be something more. This despite the fact that, many of us, whether we consider ourselves religious or not, secretly hope to do the same – to transcend our hurts and flaws and emerge as persons of character. We, too, would like to make that moral ascent.

The problem is that once we make that climb, we eventually have to come down because we cannot live up in the clouds of virtues, ideals, creeds, etc. and continue to grow. It is only in taking a leap of faith and returning to our messy, everyday worlds that our lives can truly take on new meaning. But who in the crowd is going to give us the courage to make that jump?

Another thing that church balconies remind me of is my oldest daughter's first swimming lessons. We enrolled Natasha in swimming lessons at Jacobs Park YMCA in Tucson AZ. On the last day of classes, students were to ascend a 15-foot-high dive and jump into the water below. It was a grand finale of sorts. There was a tall chain-link fence that separated the pool from the parents who were seated on aluminum bleachers. Before Natasha's class approached the high dive, a more advanced class was taking turns diving quickly and joyfully from the elevated board into the pool. That didn't happen with Natasha.

She was the first in her class to climb the high dive ladder and when she reached the top and walked out to the end of the board she froze. With her toes on the edge, she stood motionless for over a minute. In the meantime, the parents on the other side of the fence were becoming increasingly irritable. On one side of the bleachers sat a group of Hispanic mothers who were saying some unkind things in Spanish about a scowling white parent opposite them wearing a Joe Arpaio t-shirt. As you may know, Joe Arpaio is the infamous sheriff from Arizona who bullied and intimidated immigrants. In between them, sat me and a young black father. He had been telling me how angry he was about being denied his black belt at his karate class the day before. He was so mad he wanted to fight his instructor. I was equally upset about the fact the swimming class had been scheduled during the middle of the day when the temperature was 115 degrees and I forgot to bring a hat to cover my bald head.

When I noticed Natasha frozen up there on the board, I walked over to the fence to offer her some words of support. "Natasha,

you can do this. I am right here. Everything will be okay.” But she never even looked down at me. Instead she was staring ahead at what I don’t know. So, I tried again but so scared was she, it was if I wasn’t there. Now I was getting a little impatient and decided to turn up the pressure a notch. “Listen, Natasha. I know you are scared and all, but we are really burning up out here. Could you just jump?” That did not work either and I was just about to turn it up yet another notch, when I heard a voice. It was coming from behind me, to my left. And it had a Spanish accent. Someone was yelling Natasha’s name. I thought, okay, here we go. One of the parents is mad and yelling at my kid and we are going to have a big blowup in front of everyone. But that did not turn out to be the case.

When I turned to look behind me, I discovered one of the Hispanic mothers waving and smiling up at my daughter. She continued, “Natasha, you can do it. I know you can.” I remember feeling a little threatened and thinking to myself, hey I can handle this. I am the parent here. I stared back at her look to let her I know I was in charge, but when I did she looked right back and yelled even louder. “Natasha, you can do it. I have confidence in you, sweetheart.?” Sweetheart, I thought, now that’s crossing the line. And as I about to give the mother a firmer stare, she did something even more surprising. She motioned to the other Hispanic mothers to stand up and join her chant. Then to the black father. They all did as she said. Then she went to the Arpaio shirt guy and signaled for him to get up. And guess what? He got up too. Before you knew it everyone, with the exception of me moping by the fence, was rooting for Natasha. And within a matter of seconds, her body relaxed and she jumped feet first into

the pool. And the parents did the same thing for all the remaining children until every last one got the courage to jump.

So, what does this story teach us? Maybe it is that people can be made to help one another when things get really, really hot. Or that white guys do not always know the answers and sometimes need to follow the lead of others. I think both are true, but I suspect another lesson is this - that the same spirit that moved Jesus to beckon Zacchaeus down from the sycamore tree is still present today and at work in the crowd, striving to bridge the gaps that separate us, inviting us to notice those struggling in our midst, to be more than indifferent observers, more than spectators, more than cynics, to be that voice of hope that others need to take the next jump.

You be that voice.