Sermon on Proper 31 Year C 2022

*A Shock of Grace: Zacchaeus and “The Happiness Trough”*(2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10)

Maria Popova had just arrived from Bulgaria in the city of New York in the early 2000s. She was in her early 20s. As an immigrant, life in New York was wondrous, exciting but also very hard (she worked 4 jobs to pay for her university degree) and she experienced deep lonliness.

She began to write down her experiences and learning, sharing it with a few friends, a circle that grew and grew until her newsletter reached millions.

What is now called the Marginalian, is a newsletter that is both beautiful and hopeful; it’s premise is that humans are able to rediscover or find joy for the first time even if they find themselves mired in melancholy, lost in loneliness or even deep in depression.

What she writes about has been called the paradox of aging or the paradox of experience. Social scientists and psychologists have learned that most people in the developed world struggle with life’s complexity and experience a decline in happiness from their mid to late teens through their mid to late forties.

It’s called the happiness trough.

But then something amazing starts to happen people start to get out of the trough and happiness starts to increase and keeps increasing till the end of life! Of course, there are exceptions to this rule.

Part of the issue of course (and this is why long-term studies are necessary for measuring something as vague as happiness/contentment) is that we forget what we felt like at 15, 25, or 45.

The consistency of the measurements holds true across cultures and across different socio-economic conditions.

So here’s the paradox: it’s not as if life gets easier the older we get, matter of fact it doesn’t. What changes is that many of us get better at facing adversity, we get less anxious, more accepting. What we’ve endured previously helps us become more resilient and be more satisfied with our lot in life.

Our second reading is addressed to people who have grown better at facing adversity, the author commends them for their “steadfastness and faith during all your persecutions and the afflictions that you are enduring.”

Now, I don’t think God desires our suffering, but it does seem to be the case that the old saw, originally coined by the philosopher Nietzsche, is at least partway true, “what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger.”

As I said, it’s only partly true; I’ve seen abuse destroy people, I’ve seen choices to engage in certain behaviours ruin families and individuals as well as societies so it would be better to say, “what doesn’t kill you, may, if engaged with proper supports, prayer and a measure of luck, make you a better person, more aware of your weakness and so stronger, best case scenario, stronger in the Lord!

I think this is what Paul, or whoever wrote 2 Thessalonians in his name, is saying in our second reading. I have to admit I don’t look forward to suffering, I don’t look forward to physical affliction of any kind; who does?

But just knowing that it’s possible to become more resilient and thus more hopeful and joyful in the midst of it makes me less anxious about it.

Those who research the “happiness trough” find that people who are willing to change their minds, who are willing to keep learning, who take to heart the old adage “the unexamined life is not worth living,” become more open, more accepting, more empathetic to others and thus happier.

Indeed Maria Popova noted this in her own writing. Changing your mind, not for the sake of it but because you’ve encountered the truth makes you happier because now you’re more aligned with the way you really are, the way the world really is. Reality is always our friend!

We see this so powerfully in our gospel text today. Zacchaeus has spent the first part of his life accumulating. Perhaps he grew up in poverty and made an inner vow that he was not going to end up in that place.

Perhaps he’d been told he’d never achieve and made an inner vow that was essentially, “oh ya? Watch me!”

Whatever the case he was deeply dissatisfied with his life. Walking on others, stealing from others, hoarding and not giving back, all those things will do that! They will fissure your soul and leave you feeling lonely and isolated and we’ve not even started on the guilt part of the equation.

Perhaps he hopes to see in Jesus some way forward for him. We’re not told why he climbs the sycamore tree but like the story of the tax collector we read last week here, again, we see the villain experiencing a shock of grace.

A shock of grace is not merely a preacher’s rhetoric; think of it: Jesus will enter his house, here and now! In a culture that valued hospitality this probably felt like a “forced entry.”

This “shock of grace” is the flip side to the “shock of poverty” that resulted after Zacchaeus had entered ordinary homes on many a day to take account of their possessions and make demands on them in terms of taxes.

But the shock of Jesus’ self-invite is met by the shock of Zacchaeus letting his defenses drop. He’s done living the life he’s been living! Even before Jesus can give him the list of things Zacchaeus owes, Zacchaeus is spontaneously giving away his wealth and, here’s the thing, experiencing the joy of it.

It’s the letting go, it’s owning his behaviour and seeing for the first time that there’s a way forward for him that is his salvation. Zacchaeus thought he’d climb the tree to see Jesus, but instead Jesus has “seen” him and that seeing has allowed Zacchaeus to truly see, to see the change that will lead him into God’s salvation and the joy that is there for him!

Caryll Houselander, a lay catholic visual artist and mystic of the first half of the 20th century, captures what happens to Zacchaeus and what can happen to each of us when she said Jesus “prefers to be known, not by His own human features, but by the quickening of His own life in the heart, which is the response to His coming.”

Long term studies that tell us we’ll become happier as we age is a statistical average, but what we’re not “averages” we’re persons, so what about you and me?

Will we be the exception to the rule or will we experience the freedom and joy of letting go, of greater acceptance, being more in the present with friends, parishioners and neighbours?

That depends; will we follow the rule of fear that we shouldn’t reveal the secret shames we’ve held onto all these years, the way we mistreated others because, at the time we thought we needed to secure our future, because we could get away with it. Holding on to that will just lead to misery.

But if we let Christ “see” we will see! We’ll experience our own shock of grace. We’ll see that life’s mistakes, sins and fears need not define who we are.

To know Christ in this way is to let go; to freely confess; to engage in the work of making things right, not from shame but in joy.

This is the secret to becoming steadfast as we age even if aging in and of itself brings many challenges and stresses.

We don’t often think of it this way, but this table is a table of resilience.

Whether up in a tree just trying to get a better view or deep in the happiness trough, Christ invites himself in for the sake of strengthening us and we find ourselves willing to live, not merely in momentary emotional joy, but into the joy of God’s loving justice.