

November 1, 2007

Isaiah 1:10-18

Luke 19:1-10

Measurements

The Christian Century used to carry a comic strip called Kudzu, about a long suffering Southern preacher named Rev. Will B. Dunn. In a recent comic strip (8-2-07) that was described on an internet site I read, a woman comes up to the Reverend and says, “Well, well, well, so you’re Rev. Will B. Dunn. I watch your TV show and read your column, but I’ve never seen you in person before. You’re so much shorter than your sermons!”

There are a lot of ways today that we take the measure of things and one another. No different than in Jesus’ day and culture. The size of our engine, our house and property, our bank account, our waist; the prestige of our school, our neighborhood, the label on our jeans pocket; the number of keys on our key ring, meetings on our calendar and messages on our cell phone or our email when we get back from a trip,

Luke (and Luke only) reports the story of Zaccheus. IN two short sentences we learn a lot about this man’s measure – that he has a prestigious job, that he is rich and that he is short. (Although, as I was reading the internet conversation among a group of preachers this week, one of them pointed out that maybe it’s Jesus who is short, not Zaccheus – “And Zaccheus sought to see who Jesus was, but could not, because he was small of stature.” Who’s small of stature: Zaccheus or Jesus? I’m not really sure now, but tradition has it as Zaccheus. (**You** might be wondering about preachers who spend time debating Jesus’ height.....)

Short or tall, we also find out quickly what status Zaccheus has in the eyes of his community – he’s “a sinner.” And not just any sinner, but an enemy of the nation – on top of the local taxes, he collects taxes for the Romans who are siphoning everything they can off their satellite states in order to bankroll their ambitious projects across the Empire (aqueducts, international postal service, wars, etc.)

It wasn’t that long ago that we read of Jesus being accused of being a sinner because of the low life company he is keeping (read Luke 15:1 – thus the impetus and the context for the stories of the lost sheep, coin and son.) Tax collectors....bah!....apparently there’s not a good one in the bunch. Doesn’t matter that Zaccheus is scrupulous in his tax collecting and even promises to reimburse someone fourfold if he makes a mistake/defrauds AND he is giving a significant amount of his earnings to the poor. Doesn’t matter: he’s a tax collector for the Romans – he’s no good. Period.

So here we have two persons of low esteem, low repute, low regard who see each other differently than the community does – who see with a different set of lenses. Zaccheus sees Jesus as someone worth checking out and Jesus sees Zaccheus as a person of generous hospitality. Neither allows the boundaries of their world or the confines of their

culture to define themselves or each other. Zaccheus' neighbors see an outsider, Jesus sees a brother. Jesus' neighbors see a troublemaker, Zaccheus sees the realm of God.

What is the standard by which we measure ourselves and one another? How will we come to know who we are and who is our neighbor? What will we teach our children and our grandchildren about their identities and those with whom we share this planet?

Why did I raise my children in the church? Why do I focus as much of my time and energy as I can on the children here? Because I want them, I want you young people to see yourselves and to know yourselves from a bigger and grander perspective than the one we encounter relentlessly in the culture – the one that tells us that this world is ours to waste, the one that tells us that the size of our jeans or bra or pecs is what really counts, the one that encourages us to spend more than we have on that which does not even truly thrill or fulfill, the one that tells us that we are what we wear or **who** we wear, the one that tells us to be afraid, be very afraid, to keep our heads down and our defenses up, to live for ourselves and maybe our family and even a close friend or two and maybe those who look like us or talk like us or think like us and **maybe** our fellow countrymen and women but not those who are really different – they don't count any more than , in the end, we do in that kind of a world.

Why did I raise my children in the church? Because I want them and you to belong to a bigger picture, a bigger view of yourselves, a bigger world and give yourselves and your life energies and resources to a bigger vision and for a bigger purpose. That's my legacy – at least that is what I am working toward for my legacy.

Let me repeat a story I told once before. It is the story of Saint Ralph (I highly recommend this movie which is available on Netflix.) Ralph is hardly a saint in the way we traditionally think of saints. He is just a kind of gangly teenager, a 14-year-old boy with skinny legs and big ears.

He goes to a private Catholic parochial school -- but he isn't even sure he's been baptized "anything." He is often in trouble at school, gets called into the priest's office for the contents of his papers, for smoking and for ruining school property. He is constantly threatened with expulsion.

Ralph is only allowed to stay in this school out of pity. His father has been killed, and Ralph's widowed mother is very, very ill and confined to the hospital. One day, his mother falls into a deep coma. The prognosis is bleak.

Ralph desperately wants his mother to come out of that coma. He talks to her. He brings her flowers to smell. He yells at her, "Wake Up!" Nothing happens. Finally, a nurse tells him, "Ralph. It will take a miracle for your mother to come out of that coma."

Ralph asks his teacher, a priest, if only saints can perform miracles. "No," the priest tells him, but it does take someone who really believes, who really prays, and who is pure.

So, Ralph sets about trying to make a miracle. In his case, he decides he will run AND win the Boston Marathon. In fact, after falling off a rope in gym class and taking a bump on the head, he's certain God thinks this is a brilliant idea, too.

So, Ralph begins to run. Ralph runs inside the school, outside the school. Up stairs, down stairs. Up hills. Down hills

The head of the school, Father Fitzpatrick, thinks Ralph's plan is blasphemous and that he should learn his place in the world. Father Fitzpatrick tells him: **"You're 14 years old. Greatness is not at option."**

In his first attempt to run any race, Ralph places last, but he will not give up.

His classmates harass him. His friend Chester is worried that Ralph will do something that will get put on his "permanent record."

But, Ralph continues to run. In the country. In the city. In the rain. In the snow. In the day light. In the night time. Ralph runs.

Slowly, but surely, Ralph's determination to run the Boston Marathon, his faith that a miracle will happen, brings him unexpected help.

A priest, Father Hibbert (a former medal winning runner) who really didn't want Ralph to talk about miracles at all, reluctantly agreed to help him train.

A nurse teaches him about weight-lifting to help him get stronger.

Townsppeople begin to admire this young man running forward and backward, every day, without fail. He even begins to win the grudging admiration of the other boys at school.

Ralph remains troubled, though. He confesses to Father Hibbert that he doesn't know how to pray and just can't seem to do it, no matter how hard he tries. As to purity, well, he's a teenage boy going through a hormonal surge, so purity of thought just seems out of the question for him.

Other obstacles abound. Child welfare may come after him, His house burns down. On top of that, Father Fitzpatrick tells him that if he leaves school to run the Marathon, he will be expelled.

His friend Chester is there at that moment, urging him on: "You just burned down your house (it's along story). The least you can do is run the Boston Marathon."

So, Ralph runs the Boston Marathon. He runs with all the determination he possibly can. He runs believing that he can win, that a miracle waits for his mother.

While he runs, his friend Chester locks himself into a room at school with the PA system. He plays the radio broadcast over the radio, for everyone in the school to hear, risking the mark this episode will surely bring to **his** permanent record.

The girl he has a hopeless crush on prays for Ralph at the church. The nurse who's been helping him prays for Ralph in the hospital. Every kid in school listens eagerly to the radio, hoping Ralph really will be able to take the lead. Even the priest who threatened Ralph with expulsion is grudgingly, quietly cheering him on.

Ralph runs, with everything he's got. **God** is even there, cheering him along the way. It's neck and neck, all the way to the finish line.

And then, Ralph crosses the finish line -- in second place.

He is worn out, weary, utterly exhausted. He does not win. He feels defeated, a failure. Later, he returns to the hospital room where his mother still lies in her hospital bed, still in a coma.

The nurse puts her arm around this dejected 14 year old and tries to comfort him. "Don't feel bad, Ralph.", she says. "You made us all feel a part of something bigger." And, indeed, all kinds of miracles have happened along the way as Ralph has given himself to something big, something bigger.

I won't tell you the rest of the story – just in case you decide to watch it yourself. What I want us to take with us is how working at changing the world toward a vision bigger than we might ever dream possible is the double legacy of the church. "Seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow"; the wolf lying down with the lamb; a new heaven and a new earth where there will be no more tears or pain or mourning; a world where there is enough for everyone to live and prosper; where sword is turned into plowshare; where we study war no more....

As we seek to fulfill this huge vision, as we walk the path toward this life, miracles of reconciliation and compassion and understanding and growth and new life and healing and hope and joy are blossoming all along the route.

Why did I raise my children in the church – because I want them to give themselves to a bigger vision and I know that it takes courage and it takes discipline and discipline and courage take practice and partners and that is what we give one another in the church – a place to practice and partners for accountability so we don't give up or wimp out or feel alone.

What is the legacy – the big dream, the vision – you plan to pass on to the next generations?

And what is the one action you will take for the next 30 days toward that vision, that dream?

(Insert in bulletin to write/share with one another)