Book 36

Sunday November 1, 1998

YOU CAN TAKE IT WITH YOU Luke 19:1-10

We've all heard the phrase, "You can't take it with you." That advice is given to stingy people who find it painful to give anything away. They hold on to their money and other material things as if they can take it with them on that final ultimate journey. However in the same way as airlines restrict your luggage and the trunk of your car has limited capacity, so too life after death has space problems.

Is there anything you can take with you on your final journey? Yes. According to the Bible and the teachings of Jesus, there is one thing you can take with you. That one thing is love. It has an unlimited capacity, is weightless and takes up

no space.

Love can go with you wherever you go. It is the one thing that is immortal and not limited by the physical body's existence. When your physical body no longer exists, your love continues on. Your love goes with you wherever your spirit, soul and thoughts go. It also remains in the lives of those you have touched. Love is God's energy and is not limited by the laws that apply to material things or anything else associated with time.

You can take love with you and at the same time leave it behind. The more you give love away the more you have. Love is the bridge between the land of the living and the land of the dead.

In addition, the love you leave behind remains

strong and can continue to grow long after you are gone. In a study of Harvard students, researchers found that of the students who described their parents as loving, only twenty-nine percent suffered a significant illness in the thirty-five years after leaving school. Of the students who did not feel loved by their parents, a remarkable ninety-eight percent had experienced a significant illness in the same thirty-five years. This study took into account other variables such as smoking, divorce, death of a parent and so on.

But where do you get love and how do you make it grow? That's one of the themes in the story of Zacchaeus which is found in the gospel of Luke.

What do we know about Zacchaeus? Four

things. He was short. He was a chief tax-collector. He was rich. He was curious, which means he was searching for something more in life. He knew something was missing.

So when he heard Jesus was nearby he decided to find out if this man had some of the answers he was searching for. Maybe he had heard the rumors that Jesus spent time eating with sinners and tax collectors.

But the crowd was too large and he was too short to even see Jesus. We can also assume that he was not well liked by those in the crowd who knew him. In their judgment he was not to be rated among decent people.

Thus Luke writes, "He wanted to see who Jesus

was but could not on account of the crowd because he was small of stature."

Those of us who are a little taller than average might first have some difficulty identifying with those who are shorter. When we sit in a chair of any average size, our feet reach the floor. When we are in a crowd, it's not too difficult for us to see what we want to see. The problem of being a little taller than average also has its negative side. We're easier to spot when we don't want to be noticed. We cannot hide as easily as shorter people.

However what all of us forget whether we are physically tall or shorter is that each one of us can be short in other ways.

Some of us might define ourselves as being short on talent. We may have trouble carrying a tune when singing, or we might be fearful of speaking in public or acting in a drama production. Others are convinced that they are short on personality or on understanding or sensitivity.

Still others are sure that they are short on intelligence. They have trouble with computers or higher mathematics or spelling difficult words. There are those who consider themselves short on looks. They do not see themselves as handsome or beautiful. Still others believe they are short on athletic ability. No matter how much they practice in a particular sport, there is little improvement.

There are people who are short on positive

thoughts and long on negative ones. Some people are short on action. They have trouble getting started and following through. We talk about "shortcomings."

And there are those who are short on love. They find difficulty in giving love and in receiving love. In that area of life, Zacchaeus was very short.

If you find yourself being short in any one of these ways or in some other ways not mentioned, then this story about Zacchaeus is a story about you. This story is especially about you if you are short on love.

Recognizing that we are short is one thing. Doing something about it is something else. We usually handle our problem of being short in one

of three ways. Like Zacchaeus we have at least three choices.

First, he could've stayed firmly on the ground and done nothing about his problem. That would've been the safest and easiest thing to do. Maybe if he had tried hard enough, he might have been able to get a peek through the crowd and see Jesus as he passed by. He could've said to himself, "Why make any special effort? I'm too short and that's that. I'll continue to feel sorry for myself and do nothing. Nobody in the crowd likes me so I'm sure Jesus wouldn't like me either."

Those of us who handle our problem of being short in this way usually find all sorts of excuses for our inaction. We have a disadvantage com-

plex and we tell ourselves such things as: "I'm too old to make changes." The truth is, you are never too old to make changes unless you give up. Only when you reach a point of not caring anymore, then and only then, are you too old.

Or you might say to yourself, "I'm handicapped by my being too short and it's no use trying to do anything about it." The most serious handicap any one of us can have is to always give up--to do nothing.

A second way Zacchaeus could've handled his problem of being too short in stature and too short on love would've been to get a box and stand on it so that he would've been as tall as the rest of the crowd. Then he would've at least been average and would not stand out in any

way. He would be on the same level with all others. If he had done this, there would still be little risk involved. Instead of doing nothing, he would have been doing something, but not too much.

He could've at least seen Jesus as he passed by in the same way as everyone else. He would've been one of the crowd. There's a certain security in being one of the crowd. We don't have to stick our neck out or go out on a limb.

The third choice which Zacchaeus had was to get above the ground and above the crowd and for him that meant climbing a tree and literally going out on a limb. When you are out on a limb, you are taking a risk. You are visible and vulnerable. In the case of Zacchaeus, it meant that Jesus

couldn't miss him and his enemies couldn't miss him either.

"When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said, 'Zacchaeus, come down quickly for I must stay at your house.'"

Notice especially the response of Zacchaeus when Jesus invited himself into his life. "He climbed down quickly and received him joyfully." Never in his wildest dreams did he imagine that Jesus would invite himself to stay at his house and eat at his table.

Zacchaeus would not have had enough courage to extend the invitation. He knew his shortcomings and did not think of himself as being worthy enough to have Jesus or anyone else as his

guest. No one likes to be turned down. In addition to being short of stature, he was short on self-love.

When we go out on a limb as a way of dealing with our shortcomings, remarkable things can happen. When we make the first move, take the first step, when we are willing to take the necesary risk, we are in effect opening the door for the energy of God's love to become active in our lives. The energy of God's love already resides in each one of us. Now we let it take hold and begin to work for the good. That's the first part of the good news of this story.

The second part is this: no matter in what way you are "short" in your life, you need to know that God does not evaluate you in the same way that

we evaluate each other.

For example, one of the most highly valued personal attributes in our culture and in many others is physical attractiveness, beauty. Accordingly the personal worth of a newborn baby is frequently anxiously judged by his or her parents and others according to the child's physical attractiveness.

This distorted system of assessing human worth in reference to physical attractiveness is widespread. Some years ago, in Chicago, eight student nurses were viciously murdered. The following day a commentator was discussing the violent event on the radio and he said, "The thing that makes this tragedy much worse is that all eight of these young women were so attractive."

He was implying that the individuals were more valuable human beings because of their beauty. If one accepts that statement, then the opposite is also true; the murders would have been less tragic if homely young women were involved.

Very early in life, most children begin to learn the social importance of physical beauty. Many children are able then to determine the relative worth of their own physical attributes by the time they enter kindergarten. I heard a 36 year old man say, "I was five years old when I realized I was ugly and I've never been the same since."

The Christian faith, however, underscores the fact that all human beings are created worthy and have the right to personal respect and dignity. That's the way Jesus treated people. He never

evaluated them by their outward physical characteristics. Zacchaeus is only one example. Cultural values are not necessarily God's values. Jesus said to Zacchaeus, a man who didn't love himself very much and a person who was disliked by others, "Come down quickly, for I need to be a guest in your home today."

Physical characteristics, intelligence, family background, social standing, rich or poor, how tall or short a person is; we have many ways of judging people and ourselves. But God sees us differently.

A father told me this story. He and his wife were going through adoption procedures for a baby. "I realized," he said, "that I was inspecting and evaluating this child as if I were buying a new

automobile. I was actually considering if this baby girl was qualified to become my daughter. I suddenly comprehended that the infant lying there before me was a magnificent creation, regardless of any flaws or disadvantages. She was the creation of God who had given her an immortal soul, yet I stood there demanding a perfect child who would become a personal credit to me. When I realized what I was doing, I was so ashamed of myself."

God's way of looking at human beings was made very clear more than 3,000 years ago when the Prophet Samuel was seeking a new king for Israel. Samuel was about to select the tallest, the most handsome son of Jesse, but God told him he had chosen the wrong person. According to the story in the Old Testament, God said, "Do not

look on his appearance or the height of his stature, for God sees not as you see. You look on the outward appearance, but God looks inward, on the person's intentions."

This is good news for all of us. God sees inside of us. God does not judge as we judge. God looks past our shortcomings. And more than that God heals us. Once Jesus was in the house of Zacchaeus and they had dinner together, Zacchaeus was on the way to becoming a changed man.

He was still small of stature physically, but that was no longer important. Now he knew he was forgiven and loved by God. Knowing that he was able to love others and love himself. Now he had something he could take with him forever. Can

you think of anything you would rather have than the love you have given and received? You can give it away and you can take it with you. Amen.