

Any McQuaid grads here? If you were at McQuaid in the 70's or 80's you might remember Fr William O'Malley, who taught there for over 20 yrs....In one of his many books, Fr O'Malley tells how he once delivered a very unconventional homily as a guest preacher...He told the presider & the deacon beforehand what he was going to do...Then, during Mass, while the deacon was reading the Gospel...Fr O'Malley started walking in from the back of the church, disguised as a bum, with greasy hair & beard, ragged, grimy clothes & hat, & a whiskey bottle in his hand...No one knew who he was... As he weaved his way up the aisle he whispered not so quietly to people in the pews, "Could ya gimme a buck for a cuppa coffee?"... Some people were mildly amused. Some were a little embarrassed. Most just ignored him....He heard one woman tell her husband, "Harry,... He's going right up on the altar!"

And that's just what he did....The deacon acted surprised as the bum brushed him aside & took his place at the pulpit,...set his bottle down, peeled off his wig & beard & in a scolding voice began his homily:... "In the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit...If you came to church this morning looking for Jesus, you just missed Him. He came up that aisle a minute ago begging for a buck for a cup of coffee....and you want to know something? ...He didn't even get a lousy nickel." ...Fr O'Malley might've gone a little over the top, but he did get his point across, & probably could've ended his homily right there.

I hope everyone of us has come here today looking for Jesus, because when we find Him, it can be a transforming experience....In our Gospel, Zacchaeus came looking for Jesus, & when he found Him,...his life was changed forever...Zacchaeus was a Jew & a tax collector...Now, to Jews living under Roman oppression, being a Jew & a tax collector, made you a traitor & a thief. Zacchaeus made a lot of money working for the Romans & overcharging his own people...He was rich, but he wasn't happy ...His family had likely disowned him...He was not allowed to worship in the synagogue...He was shunned by his community...He knew that how he was living was offensive to God & that he had to change it, but He wasn't strong enough to do it on his own.

So, when he heard about this man Jesus who had been traveling the roads of Galilee, changing peoples' lives with His teaching & healing & miracles...Zacchaeus decided he really wanted to see this Jesus for himself, ...& so this little man took a risk & ran thru a crowd of people that might've beaten the you *know what* out of him,...& he climbed up a tree to wait for Jesus to come by.

When Jesus did come by, He looked up & saw Zacchaeus...Now we couldn't have blamed Jesus if He had said, "Zacchaeus, you dirty, rotten sinner! You better pay back all the money you've stolen from your people....If you don't, God's gonna getcha' good."...But that's not Jesus' way. As He declares in today's Gospel, "I have come to seek & save the lost...not condemn them."...Everyone else looked at Zacchaeus & saw a dirty, rotten sinner...Jesus saw a sinner who had come looking for Him, ...a sinner who wanted to be changed, to be healed....Jesus didn't see the man Zacchaeus was...He saw the man Zacchaeus could become. ...& that's how He sees everyone of us...You may have heard someone say, "Jesus loves me just the way I am."...Now, that is true – but there's more to it: Jesus DOES love me just the way I am...but He loves me too much to want me to stay that way.

You see, Jesus knows I can do better...He sees the person I can become...He wants me to experience the total & complete joy He said can be mine if I would... "See Him more clearly, love Him more dearly, follow Him more nearly – day by day"...(Godspell)...You and I are not any different than Zacchaeus. ...Like him, we know in our hearts when there's something

preventing us from getting right with G...I know when what I'm thinking or saying or doing is hurting someone or hurting myself...I know when what I'm thinking or saying or doing is hurting God. ...We all know...don't we?...And we know that if we try to change it on our own, it's usually not gonna work, is it?

OK, now, if there are any of you who think that there is nothing about you that Jesus wants you to change,...you can close your eyes & take a nap...(if you aren't already),... because what I have to say next won't apply to you... just to the rest of us pathetic sinners..

When Jesus saw Zacchaeus in that tree, He called him by name,.. told him to come on down, & invited Himself to dinner...When Zacchaeus saw that Jesus knew him & called him by name, & he saw how eager Jesus was to accept him & want to spend time with him - when everyone else thought he was a lousy crook, Zacchaeus underwent a remarkable change,...He promised to give half of what he owned to the poor, & to pay back four times what he cheated from the people. He was a changed man, a new man.

If we want to make any meaningful changes, then, like Zacchaeus, we need to look for Jesus, ...get close to Jesus....When we do,...He will accept us just as we are- the good & the bad. He will invite Himself into our lives -as He did Zacchaeus - & help us make the changes we need to make...He will give us the grace & the strength to be healed of whatever is keeping us from the peace & sense of well-being He wants for us...We need to believe with St. Paul in his Letter to the Phillipians: "*I can do all things thru Christ who strengthens me.*"...ALL THINGS., even those things we've been struggling to do for a long time.

OK, so here's the thing, ...To be the best WE that WE can be,...we have to go to Jesus, go to meet Jesus.... Coming to Mass, ...receiving Him in Holy Communion, ...praying, ...faith sharing...reading the Bible, ...These are all CLOSE encounters with Jesus Christ,...And when we come to them open to what He wants to change in us, it will happen...although, it may not happen as quickly as it did for Zacchaeus...Jesuit priest and philosopher Teilhard de Chardin wrote that we must "trust in the slow work of God."...Once we decide, it will take what it takes to turn things around...in God's good time.

Now, Jesus isn't only found in the holy places & prayerful places....As Fr. O'Malley so dramatically demonstrated, close encounters with Jesus can also happen where we least expect...Jesus, in His description of the Final Judgment, tells us that whenever we encounter one of the least & the lost of the world, we are encountering Him.

*He can be found at bed #17 at the homeless shelter...

* He can be found in countless beds of anxiety & pain in a hospital or in a hospice....

* Jesus can be found in the lonely shut-in who spends hrs on end, longing for someone to talk to

* Jesus can be found in the grieving parents staring at the empty place at the dinner table...

* He can be found in the immigrant struggling to make a home in a strange, new land....

* He can be found in the confused, troubled teenager aching to be listened to & understood.

* Jesus can be found in the new life growing in the womb, & in the fading life breathing its last.

Wherever & whenever we encounter Jesus, it has the potential to change us,...to make us more like He wants us to be...In a few minutes, we will come forward to meet Jesus in the most powerful, most intimate way, as we take Him into ourselves, as He becomes one with us... As you come up to meet Jesus, I invite you to do this with me...Bring with you one thing about yourself that you know Jesus wants you to change. Bring it with you,...& as you hold out your hands to receive Jesus....offer it to Him as He offers Himself to you...& ask Him to give you what you need...the strength,...the courage,...the faith,...the will to change...It may not be easy to change something we've been doing for so long...but with His help,...you can do it. ...We can do it...If you are willing to do this with me, let me hear an AMEN!.... AMEN!