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Destined for Love

Fr. Anthony Co

Father Anthony Co: Good morning. What a beautiful weekend. I hope you all had a chance to go for a stroll. It's 74 degrees. The birds were chirping, *chirp* *chirp*, the wind was blowing, the sun was out, it was absolutely amazing. Now the Cubbies, awe... Come on now. Well, maybe we'll do better in the future. But God's been good. It's been a great week, it's been a great couple of months, and I'm very thankful. One thing that's on my mind is a Grace, has been going to Jordan Grade School for the grade school mass. So, the priest of our cluster, typically we scatter the masses that we do there throughout the year, but I asked the principal if I could have them all in one block. So I have all of October and all of November. And it's been great. After mass, I go to the grade school. I've been kind of focusing on one class so I can get to know them third graders. Third graders are cool because they still like me, you know. And they're easy to be with, and they're interested. And so I learned how to color between the lines.

I went to the second grade and I got to practice my nouns and adjectives and verbs, and I was with the kindergarteners, and I was practicing sitting criss-cross applesauce. So, I feel pretty good about myself, you know. I've learned a lot of stuff these last couple of weeks. So they're great. And at the mass, what I try to do is to provide them something a little bit different, because I want them to go through their K-8 and leave that school with a deep love for the Lord. You know, I don't want them to have this experience of God as, you know, this great uncle who every 5 years sends a present in the mail. You never see him, you hear about him once in while. I don't want that experience for them. I want them to have a faith that's like mine or better than mine, you know. I wake up in the morning and I have a sense of the presence of God. I wake up in the morning and I hear God's voice speaking to me throughout the day. And when I kind of think about, like, the oldness of my own thoughts, or the oldness of my own heart at times, I get to see the Lord come in and start working on me throughout the day. It's amazing. You know, I'm not by myself. The Lord is with me. And I want them to have this deep sense of an encounter with the Lord.

So in the homilies, I try all sorts of different things, and recently I was thinking about last semester. I had the kids reflect on this passage. It's from Romans. St. Paul says "If you confess with your mouth and believe in your heart that Jesus was raised from the dead, you shall be saved." Confess with your lips and believe in

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your heart that Jesus was raised, you shall be saved. Well, I want to be saved. You want to be saved. And so I said to them “You know, you’re here today because you believe in your heart that Jesus was raised from the dead and, in many ways, there’s different ways to confess with your mouth, but it’s something special when we publically, personally confess with our own lips that we love the Lord.” So I said “This is what we’re going to do”, this is at mass at St. Pious.

You can imagine 200 kids are out there, some old grandmas there for their grandkids, a few parents who don’t work that day, teachers and such. And I said “Okay, I’m going to tell you that I love Jesus, and then I invite you to stand up and say that you love Jesus.” And it was so beautiful. They just started popping up like popcorn. One little boy was like, he started off. “I love Jesus!” And then another little girl “I love Jesus!” And then some grandma, “I love Jesus!” And then some teacher. And before I knew it, the whole place was erupting with people professing their love for the Lord. It was beautiful. You know how sometimes kids, you ask them to do something which requires a little bit of involvement, and they do it in a sarcastic way, kind of making fun of it? They weren’t doing that at all. Like, you could see in their eyes their excitement for the Lord, and it was beautiful. Professing with their lips.

And I mention this because today’s gospel passage has everything to do with that. We know the story of Zacchaeus or Zacchaeus. I was thinking about that song I learned in kindergarten. How does that song go? You’re going to have to help me out with the last words of every verse. “Zacchaeus as a wee little man, a wee little man was...?”

Crowd: He

Father Anthony Co: He climbed up a sycamore tree to see what he could...?”

Crowd: See

Father Anthony Co: Oh, nice. You can practice it at home on YouTube if you want, but that’s all I know for that song. Zacchaeus. Okay, so he’s in Jericho. Jericho is, I think, my memory is it’s like 45 minutes to an hour south of Jerusalem. You’re going down a descent, out into the wilderness. Jericho, I believe, if my memory serves me, it’s the oldest city in the world where there’s still people living continuously, and the Israelis to this day, they go down to Jericho during the winter months because it’s warmer there. It’s hot down there, and they want to enjoy some warm weather. So, Zacchaeus had some kind of change of heart. We don’t really know what happened. And he wanted to see Jesus,

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and Jesus was passing through the town, and he was a wee little man, and he climbs up that sycamore tree.

Now, what's interesting about Zacchaeus is that he wasn't only a tax collector, which was a person who's pretty wealthy, pretty despised; he was a chief tax collector. He was super wealthy and super despised, because he was a thief. That was his job. He stole from his own people. And what was interesting is he climbed up that sycamore tree. Now, if you are a tree dresser, or an arborist, or you collect fruits from a tree, it makes sense for a grown man to climb up a tree. But a person of his position, too weird. You know, for him to do that, he would have to swallow his pride, he would have to be unashamed, and obviously he was excited to see Jesus. So he climbs up that tree, Jesus sees him, and He says "Zacchaeus, come down that tree, for today I must stay at your house." People began to grumble. You invite somebody over to your home, that's a sign of fellowship, of friendship, and didn't Jesus know this guy's a sinner? He's a jerk.

And then Zacchaeus did something amazing. Really important, really special. He does 3 basic things which leads to some special grace. He calls Jesus "Lord". I don't know if you picked that up. He says "Behold half of my possessions Lord." Then he says "I give half of my possessions to the poor." Jesus loves the poor, God loves the poor. Somehow, mysteriously, the forgiveness of our sins is tied into giving our alms to the poor. He calls him "Lord", gives to the poor, and then he says this: "If I have extorted anything, I'll pay it back." In the Old Testament, if you stole an ox and you got caught, I assume, then you would have to owe the person 4 oxen. 5 oxen. And then if you stole a sheep, you would have to pay them back with 4 sheep. And so he's following the Old Testament law and he wants to give back to the people, and obviously he stole from a lot of people. And can you imagine Like, okay, here's this key figure who's a thief, nobody can do anything about it, he's so powerful, and he's in this town which is big – it's not that big, but it's big – and now he's changed. Imagine how the change... how the town changed because of this man.

And then Jesus says this "Today, salvation has come to this house." Zacchaeus received salvation, which is two-fold. One, he received the amazing grace of the forgiveness of his sins. He dies, boom. He's going to go to the heaven with our Lord. But the second part is this: He had Jesus come to his house, Jesus is salvation. I mean, only a handful of people had the Lord come to their house. Peter had Him come, some scribes, maybe Pharisees, but this guy also had the great privilege of having our Lord there. Zacchaeus was a man who obviously was searching for God, who made some detours, some pretty big ones. Anybody do

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that? He made some detours. But in the end, what he found out was that Jesus all along was searching after him. That's what makes it different for us as Christians. We don't seek after God, God seeks after us.

And what I really wanted to talk about today was something that St. Augustine said about this very passage. St. Augustine, the great church father. You know who he is. He says this: "The reason that you cannot see Jesus", so the you is you, so I'm pointing at you, but it's also at me. "The reason that you cannot see Jesus", and I'll add my own words, "and see more of him is because you are ashamed to climb the sycamore tree." The reason why we can't see Jesus more is because we're afraid to climb that sycamore tree. And the sycamore tree is public. It's not like in the privacy of your own home, you know, it's public. As I mentioned about those kids, the Holy Spirit allowed them to be there at mass. But the fact that they were able to stand up and vocalize that they loved the Lord, that opens us up to the ability to be even more courageous for Him.

So, like, He cooperates with our decisions to be publically professing our faith. I'm not saying that we have to be theologians. A person who is a theologian knows all sorts of stuff about history and revelation stuff. We don't have to be apologists. Apologists are people who know how to defend the Catholic faith, "And this is why we believe in this and that and this." And that's good. But as Christians, every single one of us, no matter our skill, to live a life of love is to put our hearts out there, and to tell people that we love Him, we love the Lord, and in an innocent and a gentle way we love Jesus.

On my last trip back from Israel I was sitting next to these 2 pretty Israeli girls. And, you know, what's interesting is that they don't understand Christianity. You know, the place of Christ? for whatever reason, they didn't know anything about Jesus. And so I'm kind of describing things, and explaining, and I'm trying to get into the conversation that I love the Lord. And it kind of dawns on them that I'm a priest, and so they're like "Wait a second, there's something weird about priests. We can't remember what it is. Oh yeah, something about marriage." "Oh yeah, I'm a celibate." And that was just, like, so weird for them, because for Jewish people, there's not a place for celibacy, because if you're celibate you stop the chance for the messiah to come. They're waiting for the messiah.

So I was explaining to them "I live this way because God called me, and because I love Jesus." It's really important for us to say that. And also, I think I was telling the kids that, like, you know, I have kind of a fluid sense of who is my uncle and aunt in my family. I have my biological ones, you know, on my mom's side and

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my dad's side, but then we have so many people come into our family that our uncles and aunts age. And so as a kid, I knew I could say "I love you" to my biological ones, but I wasn't quite sure if I could say "I love you" to the ones that were, like, neighbors, but they're not related to me. And I began to do it, and it got easier, and easier, and easier.

So, I tell you all of this because we need to challenge ourselves to climb up that tree if we want to see the Lord. Do you want to see Lord Jesus? Do you want to have a faith that is just on fire and the Lord's constantly speaking to you throughout the day? You sense His presence, He's renewing your mind and your heart, you're willing to do anything for Him? Well, we have to find the tree. And, so this is when you think to yourself "Oh, that Father Anthony, I like his short masses, but now he's making us feel uncomfortable, because you know what we're going to do next? We're going to do what those little kids did as they popped up like popcorn at St. Pious Catholic Church. But don't worry, here is a room of people who love Jesus, people who you've sat next to. Maybe you don't know very well, but sat next to for 10 years? 20 years? 30 years? Maybe higher? 40 years? 50 years? 60 years? Okay. So we're in a safe environment, that's good. And the more we do it with the people who love us and who are with us, the easier it is to share with other people. Again, it's all up to you. If you don't want to see Jesus, well, that's your choice. But if you do want to see Jesus, you've got to climb up that tree.

So, what's going to happen first is I'm going to tell you, because it's only fair, that I love the Lord, and then if you want you're going to stand up in front of all of these strangers individually and say that you love the Lord. So here you go. Get ready for it. I'm telling you. I want you to know that I love you. See, there's the twist. I do. I really love you. And I know I'm new here, and I have to earn a place in your hearts, and that you have to see me and interact with me. But when I get done with mass on Sunday, and speed off to Sterling, Illinois where I hang out with priests, and we watch movies, play games, eat junk food, lift weights. There's like 5 of us who kind of congregate. I don't just, like, forget about you. My friend Father Bruce has a chapel, and I sit in there, and I pray my prayers, and I think about you guys, and about your lives, and how I can serve you better.

And I know some of you will warm up to me really quickly – there's like 5% of people who do that – and then there's a bell curve. And then some of you will warm up to me probably in the last 3 weeks, before I leave for my next assignment – that's when you'll invite me over for dinner. That's okay. That's okay. I want you to know that. But I also love Jesus. Oh yeah, that's the point. I love the Lord.

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And I pray that even if He asked me to risk my life, I could stretch out my neck and “Here, chop off my head. Go ahead” Because I love the Lord, I want to follow Him wherever He wants me to go. Now, here’s the question for you: Is there anyone out there who’s willing to stand up and say that they love Jesus? Let’s hear it.

Crowd: I Love Jesus and I love you Father Anthony.

Father Anthony Co: Oh, amen. Amen. Oh, thank you. Amen. Amen. Alright, how about in this section over here? Anybody?

Crowd: I love Jesus.

Father Anthony Co: Amen. You guys are awesome. Praise God. Look at this.

Crowd: I love Jesus.

Father Anthony Co: Are we Baptists or what? Awesome. I know there’s more of you who are going to stand up and “God is so good! God is so good!” I think we just, in the ways that we can, we publically find a way, a sneaky way, gentle way, innocent way to tell people “you know, I love the Lord.” And you know what? In the end, if they think we’re weird, like, who cares? You’ve got family and friends who love you. And maybe some of them are your family and friends that think you’re weird. That’s okay, Jesus loves you. We want to see the Lord, and we’d doing this because we want to see the Lord. Climbing up that sycamore tree. And what Jesus is going to say to you, “You climb up that tree today.” Today. Salvation has come to this house.