



St. Francis Mourned by St. Clare and her sisters

ONE SMALL STEP FOR A NEIGHBOR - ONE GIANT LEAP FOR THE COMMON GOOD
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Jesus says, "Blessed are the *merciful*, for they will *be shown mercy*." (Matthew 5: 7)

My eight-year-old nephew had been working for months on a school report about the state of Ohio. While he had hoped to be assigned California, he eventually decided to do his best with the Buckeye State. On the day of his presentation he dressed as the astronaut Neil Armstrong, born in Ohio and the first person to walk on the moon. Offering his class a few concluding thoughts he donned his space helmet and spontaneously sang, "Ground Control to Major Tom (ten, nine, eight, seven, six) commencing countdown, engines on (five, four, three) check ignition and may God's love be with you (two, one, liftoff)." This reference to the 1972 David Bowie song entitled *Space Oddity* earned high esteem from his teacher, who was a huge Bowie fan!

Later in the song Major Tom speaks back to Ground Control saying, "...the stars look very different today; for here am I sitting in a tin can far above the world; planet earth is blue and there's nothing I can do." Being up so high provides not only a different perspective of the stars and the earth, but also of oneself as being but a small part of a much larger whole. Such experiences of awe and wonder can easily lead to one's feeling insignificant, or even helpless.

I can't help but wonder if such thoughts and feelings were inside of Zacchaeus the tax collector, when in Luke's Gospel he climbed up into a tree to better see Jesus. Searching for Jesus by scanning the crowd, separated from everyone (not only in height) I imagine that he felt like he was sitting in a "tin can", wrapped in the money he had acquired by cheating so many people. Then spotting him, Zacchaeus looked down at Jesus seeing not the blue earth, but rather the one *in whom all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, [for] all things have been created through Him and for Him.* Was Zacchaeus paralyzed up there, gazing in wonder at Jesus? Did he feel like Major Tom, as if there was nothing he could do?

As God's love accompanied Major Tom's liftoff into space, so too God's love called Zacchaeus back to earth, when Jesus coaxed him down from the tree and then invited himself to Zacchaeus' home. This encounter with Jesus led Zacchaeus to realize that there was something he could do! For after some time together, Zacchaeus the tax collector chose to do something quite profound by offering restitution to everyone he had cheated.

As Jesus did with Zacchaeus, Saint Francis of Assisi would often invite himself into the middle of people's economic life by preaching in the town squares. Like today, the regular economic transactions of his time too often disadvantaged the poor, while benefiting only those who wrapped themselves in tin cans of wealth and prestige. Francis understood that his public preaching needed to be grounded in the Church's calling people to relationship with God, which included a reordering of the economic priorities of the time. This included a movement from an over emphasis on the increase of profit or power to the service of persons and the entire human community.

In his short lifetime Francis made a transformative impact in the turning of people's hearts. This reality can be seen through the fresco in Assisi depicting the body of Francis at San Damiano after his death, when Saint Clare and her sisters were able to pay their respects. Immediately to the left of this encounter there is a small man climbing a tree, to better be able to look down and catch a glimpse of the dead saint. Placing this "Zacchaeus figure" in the fresco serves as a metaphor for how Francis, first with his own life and then in the lives of countless others, brought the justice of restitution to a world obsessed with profit and power.



I remember talking about this dynamic to a German Friar after his first reading of Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Sí*. He was thinking of his life in Germany when he came to the conclusion that: *It is not that I am rich, and they are poor; but rather that because I am rich, they are poor!* This insight is a contemporary "Zacchaeus moment" that begs for a kind of response from us that brings about restitution based on distributive justice. Simply put, when we realize that we are using our money to buy products that exploit others, it is incumbent upon us to shift our consumption, even if it means paying more for the sake of supporting fair-trade practices. Everyday concrete examples range from clothing to chocolate and coffee.

In the 2018 meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos-Klosters, Switzerland, Pope Francis called for a "wise discernment" that would put the human person and her or his rights at the center of economic decision making for the common good, providing for a fair and equitable sharing of profits. "Now is the time to take courage and bold steps for our beloved planet. This is the right moment to put into action our responsibility to contribute to the development of humanity."

Pope Francis has added his voice to the call of generations of Franciscans for a more fraternal economy that necessitates distributive justice. The directive from our Franciscan Mission Control, the Gospel, is for everyone to take *bold steps* out of our tin cans, like the steps of Neil Armstrong as he looked down on our blue planet from the surface of the moon. So that each of us might take *One Small Step for a Neighbor*, and together *One Giant Leap for the Common Good*.

"Ground Control to *You & Me* (ten, nine, eight, seven, six) commencing countdown, engines on (five, four, three) check ignition and may God's love be with you (two, one, liftoff)."