

I had never heard  
of corn mazes until we moved here.  
Giant designs made out of corn  
Bring thousands of tourists  
Each year,  
And for my kids,  
The haunted corn maze  
is the best.

The most fun, they say  
Is to play Marco Polo  
In the corn maze at night.

In groups they start separately  
And try to find each other  
Before the end  
By yelling Marco.

The plan is that their  
Friends will here them  
And shout back "Polo!"

The funny thing is  
That it doesn't  
Work.

Why?  
Because if you shout  
Marco in a crowd  
Of people, in a dark  
Corn maze,  
They will enter into the fun.

Hundreds of strangers will  
Shout Polo in response  
And you'll wind up  
Confronted with  
Those unknown to you,  
Instead of the friend you were hoping to find.

Zacheaus had been  
shouting Marco  
All his life.  
But every time he heard  
A responding Polo,  
It was the world's reaction,  
Money, wealth, power  
Social status and prestige  
That answered him.

Not the hope and answer

That he hoped to find.

Z was a short, rich, powerful, despised man  
Living in a beautiful, powerful city

Z was a Tax Collector  
in Jericho, an important  
and wealthy city  
that according  
to William Barclay  
commanded “both the approach  
to Jerusalem and the crossings  
of the river, which gave access  
to the lands east of the Jordan.

It had a great palm forest  
Famed rose gardens  
and world famous balsam groves  
which perfumed the air  
for miles around.

All this combined  
to make Jericho one  
of the greatest taxation  
centers in Palestine.

Adrian Dieleman tells us  
that “In the Roman provinces  
there were three  
main kinds of taxes:  
a produce tax on  
all the crops and goods  
produced,  
a universal poll tax  
assessed every resident,  
and a toll or customs tax  
to be paid as goods  
were transported  
from one province  
to another.

To collect this last tax,  
custom booths were located  
at the border between  
provinces on all the major highways  
and trade routes.

The tax collectors would often  
over-assess the value of goods.  
Furthermore, Roman law  
allowed the tax collectors

to confiscate and keep goods  
not declared by the merchant.  
Here then, the system  
was ripe for abuse  
as many tax collectors  
would improperly seize goods.”

This is how Z made his money.  
He bought the tax franchise  
From Rome and hired others  
To collect the tax.  
He was so wealthy a man  
That he himself did not have to work.

So Z is excited to see Jesus,  
but he's too short  
to see over the crowds,  
too short for Jesus to see him,  
This is not good,  
As he is hoping for a word  
from the Rabbi  
some are calling Messiah.

So he runs ahead  
and climbs a sturdy tree.  
The sycamore tree of Palestine  
is not at all like our sycamores.  
They are wide trunked,  
far reaching sturdy trees  
and even with his size,  
Z can easily climb the tree  
and clamber out on a branch  
to hang over the roadway.

Now, Z is not the only one  
who wants to see Jesus.  
He is not the only one  
hoping for a word.

The road is teeming with others  
who feel exactly the same way.  
And who feel a little more worthy  
Of Jesus' attention and respect.

So, when he is noticed by Jesus,  
and called out into fellowship with him,  
the murmuring begins,

because Z is not well liked.  
He is wealthy and possibly shady.  
To the crowd, he is not righteous enough.

But of course,  
Jesus does not view  
the world or its people  
or its justice  
the way we do.

He dines with the sinful,  
heals the outcast  
and loves the forsaken.

So of course, Jesus calls Z,  
a wealthy man,  
and tells him  
that he must stay with him.  
And Z is full of joy  
and brings Jesus  
to dinner and his life is changed.

Now, there is scholarly discussion  
about whether Z  
was in fact a corrupt  
tax manager or not.

The translation of his statements  
about giving half his income  
to the poor and returning  
4-fold to those  
he's cheated is tricky.

The most accurate translation  
for his statement  
is a verb tense that implies  
the concept of always has.

In other words,  
the most accurate way  
to take what Z tells Jesus  
is that he has always given  
half his money to the poor  
and when he hears  
that his collectors  
have cheated someone  
he makes restitution 4-fold.

But we most often hear  
the traditional translation  
that Z is telling Jesus  
from here forward  
he will give half his income  
to the poor and

make restitution fourfold.

It is no surprise that  
we find it far easier  
to believe the man  
was corrupt and changed completely  
only after being  
in the presence of Christ.

But it could be also,  
that Jesus is holding Z up  
as an example of how  
the wealthy can still be  
an agent for good  
in God's kingdom,  
as in Luke's gospel especially,  
the rich are more often  
held up as examples  
of contempt.

Either interpretation  
gives us rich food for thought.  
And either way,  
it is good news for us.

Why? Because it tells us  
that encountering Jesus  
does not depend on  
the goodness of our life,  
but that the encounter  
can bring about a conversion  
of life that brings us  
into the kingdom of God's joy.

One of our collects offers us  
these words about God.  
"For you love all things  
that are and loathe nothing  
that you have made;  
for what you hated,  
you would not have fashioned.  
How could a thing remain  
unless you willed it;  
or be preserved,  
had it not been  
called forth by you?  
You spare all things,  
because they are yours,  
O God and lover of souls."

Everything and everyone

exists because they are  
created by God.

God spares all things  
because they are his.  
This was true about Z,  
it is true about us  
and it is true about all those people  
that we put into sycamore trees;  
those people we think  
are less deserving  
of Christ's love  
than we are;  
those people we see  
as worthless, crazy,  
too radical, too sinful,  
too left, too right,  
too black, too white,  
too unlike us.

Jesus is constantly seeking out  
those who are less  
than expected,  
less than perfect,  
less than ideal.

In fact, he seeks out  
the broken far more often  
than he seeks out the whole.

Which is good news indeed  
for anyone who has  
ever felt small and lost.

You see, God is seeking us,  
and not just us,  
but everyone.

Our gospel ends  
with Jesus affirmation,  
"For the Son of Man came  
to seek out and to save the lost."

We are all lost.  
We may shout out Marco  
to the world and follow  
the misleading responses  
of wealth or prestige  
or self interests,  
but at the center of the maze,  
at the center of our being

the great I am  
is ready always  
to receive us.  
Ready always  
to be our direction,  
our guiding principle  
and welcome us home.  
Amen.