

A PART OF THE WHOLE

Mike Rowe has become a bit of celebrity. He has been on all of the morning and evening talk shows, he was given an entire hour on the Larry King show, and recently I have seen him in both TV and print ads.

What is Mike Rowe's claim to fame? Well, if you haven't already seen it, Mike is the host of a television show on the Discovery Channel titled "Dirty Jobs". It has become a hit on cable television.

Every week Mike travels too and participates in, as the title suggests, a "dirty job". But as anyone who has seen the show can tell you, not only are many of the jobs physically dirty, they are also disgusting. The "eweee" factor is quite high. One week Mike might be scrubbing bird poop from marine buoys (which as we are learning from the Minneapolis bridge collapse is an important maintenance task) and the next he might be cleaning out the sewers of Manhattan and discovering all of the "treasures" found there. Since the show began, Mike has tried over 150 dirty and disgusting jobs.

But along the way of creating a show with a cringe factor, something else happened. Something that has made Mike Rowe not only a TV celebrity but now a world-class motivational speaker who has spoken to the employees and management of companies like Motorola and CBS and who, in speaking, has followed the likes of Colin Powell.

What Mike Rowe found is that in doing these "dirty jobs" one had to work beside and learn from those who do these jobs not just once for a TV show but who do them every day of their lives. What Mike Rowe and all the viewers found were very happy and fulfilled and optimistic people who did these jobs.

When Mike began to notice this, he started to ask questions to ascertain why these people with some of the most disgusting jobs were so dog gone happy. And this is what he found: The people who do these dirty jobs have a sense of personal

gratification. They see with their own eyes that they have made a contribution to society. They take great pride in what they do because they know, they are convinced, that what they do is important, is vital to the whole. They know that if you remove them from the chain, then the whole structure falls in on itself. They see themselves as not “optional” but “necessary”. And their happiness and sense of contentment spills over to their other relationships in life, they are happy and fulfilled family members, they are kind and generous neighbors. This is the finding that has made the show popular and has made Mike Rowe a celebrity and an in demand speaker.

The sense of meaning and purpose, of contributing to the common good, of being not just a part, but of being a vital part of the structure and fabric of society and the world, you just cannot underestimate the power that has in the lives of people.

I chose the Gospel story of Jesus and Zacchaeus as our text this morning because in my heart of hearts I see this kind of thing happening with Zacchaeus. You just heard the story and many of you have heard it since Sunday School. Zacchaeus is a tax collector, not just a tax collector but a chief tax collector which gives him a fair amount of power and has made him very wealthy. What is more, Luke reveals in his story that Zacchaeus is shorter than the average citizen of Jericho because he had to shimmy up a tree in order to see what is happening on the street.

Now many think that power and riches will bring happiness and happiness will bring meaning and purpose but that seems to not be the case with Zacchaeus (and I would argue with anybody). Something was missing in Zacchaeus’ life and so when he hears that Rabbi Jesus is in town, Zacchaeus decides to go check him out.

As you already know, Jesus sees Zacchaeus in the tree and invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus house (being the Son of God has its advantages).

As noted, the town people grumble because not unlike it is with IRS agents in our day, this was not an occupation held in high esteem by the citizens of Jericho or pretty much anywhere else.

Now, what Jesus and Zacchaeus talked about while they dined is not revealed by Luke or by Jesus (must be pastoral confidentiality). But we do know the result; Zacchaeus gave half of his goods to the poor and made restitution fourfold to anyone whom he defrauded.

So what happened? Well, since my friends in the religion faulty are hear I will discourage anyone from making an argument from silence without a lot of evidence. Having said that, it doesn't stop us from speculation, from musing about what may have happened and I'm going to do just that.

In their conversation, Jesus certainly could have read Zacchaeus the riot act. "Zacchaeus you lousy excuse for a human being, you're bleeding your people dry, your life is just falling apart and if you don't start traveling the straight and narrow right now, you are going straight to hell in a handbasket, so reach down for those ethical and moral bootstraps and pull yourself up man." Jesus could have said that.

Or, Jesus could have pointed out to Zacchaeus that Zacchaeus was a child of God, a royal priest, an heir to God's Kingdom. Maybe Jesus pointed out that with all his power and riches Zacchaeus was missing the real meaning of life and that was found in honest work, loving relationships and in serving God and contributing to the common good.

Maybe Jesus issued a call to vocations in the world and maybe that touched the heart and life of Zacchaeus and he could do no other than give to the poor and make restitution so that justice would prevail. And having found meaning and purpose in life, maybe, just maybe Zacchaeus would be happy with life and his various roles in society.

In this enterprise of higher education we certainly have an obligation to teach the methods and rules of the disciplines, but here at PLU, we strive to do more than that. We strive as we are able to show our students that their various majors and relationships and roles in society are not just some willy-nilly coincidence. We try to convey to them as best as possible, that they have a calling, a vocational calling, that includes their jobs and careers but also all of their interconnectedness to others. And this call, calls them beyond themselves to lives of adventure and excitement, of joy and happiness, of suffering and sacrifice, to serve the common good.

We try, as best we can, to teach them what the folks who do those dirty jobs already have discovered, that meaning and purpose in life is not linked to riches or possessions or glamour, it is linked to seeing yourself contributing to the whole, to the common good.

And hopefully when our students leave this place, they leave here with hope and with the sure confidence that who they are and what they do are important. And hopefully, they too will come to the place where they see their careers and their place in their families and in their communities as so important to the whole, that if you removed them from the chain, then the whole thing would fall in on itself.

And it falls on us, the capital "A" adults to share that wisdom with our students, because like it or not our students are watching us and we are mentors to many of them. How we approach the world, how we find meaning and purpose in life, how we see ourselves as part of the whole, matters not only to us but to those whom we teach.

And truth be told it doesn't matter whether our lives are glamorous or not, or whether we're rich or not, because as we learn from those who do the "Dirty Jobs" those things have nothing to do with happiness, joy and meaning and purpose in life.

May gave give us all that insight as we fulfill our vocational callings here at PLU and in the world. Amen.

Reverend Dennis G. Sepper
University Pastor