A teenage boy jumps from the diving board into a swimming pool, tucks his legs to his chest, and cries out “Cannonball!” as he splashes noisily into the water. It may not be a beautiful dive, (certainly there is no category for Cannonball dives in Olympic competition), but you have to admit it is a beautiful thing to see someone totally commit to the dive, to make the greatest possible splash. We might say, they were “all in.”

A gambler in a high stakes poker game pushes all of her chips into the center of the table, risking everything, total win or total bust, on a single set of cards. As she pushes her pile of chips to the center, she says, “I am all in.”

“All in.” It is a phrase signifying total commitment to course of action—it is a high wire act without nets, a couple in love, deciding to marry, a golfer hitting a ball over the hazard in the hope of winning the tournament on the final hole. Such radical commitments are not like the
normal course of ordinary decisions we make each day, where the risks are not so great, and the rewards are not so memorable—whether to order pasta or salad at lunch, to turn right or left at the traffic light, to wear the blue sweater or the red one. Truth is, few of us could stand the pressure of living on the ragged edge of “all in” decisions very often anyway. Occasionally we do face those few, and crucial, moments that demand us to go “all in.” It is how we respond to those moments, those commitments, that shape our lives, our character, and our legacy.

Think back on your life. What have been some of the “all in” moments you have faced so far? Did you seize them, or waver? Did you shrink back in the face of the risk, or did you take a deep breath and plunge ahead into the risky, beautiful future ahead. And if you did go “all in,” what made you take such a risk?

Our Gospel story today from Saint Luke is just such a story of guy going “all in.” His name was Zacchaeus. There is a children’s song about the “wee little man” who climbed up in the tree to see Jesus. And
that is the story Luke tells. But this is a **grown-up** story, if ever there was one. We mustn’t let the fact that we learned this story as children, and accompanied it with a cute song, cause us to miss the severity and risk and joy that resides in this tale. There is plenty here to make the strongest among us feel weak in the knees, the most religious among us to feel weak in the soul, the wealthiest among us to feel weak in the wallet.

Zacchaeus comes to the plate with three strikes against him—**first,** he is a tax collector, the most despised of all trades by the Jewish people (as you heard in Deacon Jim’s homily last Sunday) because he was a traitor to his own people, in bed with the occupying Roman government, collecting their hated taxes, and keeping as much extra as he could squeeze out of this neighbors. **Second,** he is short. Actually Luke’s word here is that he is “micro-sized.” You can imagine how he must have felt belittled by the “small jokes” he heard throughout his life. It is tough living in a world designed for, and by, the majority’s body shape, or economic level, or racial type, when you do not fit that mold. **Third,**
Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was very rich. (By this point in Luke’s Gospel, we are conditioned to know that “rich” spells trouble with Jesus and the Kingdom.) From Mary’s Magnificat, to the parables Jesus told about the Rich Fool, and the Rich Man and Lazarus, to the refusal of the rich young ruler to follow Jesus because of his love for possessions, the reversal of rich and poor in the Kingdom seems to be a constant thread tying each chapter together. So when we hear that Zacchaeus is rich, we can almost hear the proverbial swish of the bat, and the Divine Umpire declaring, “You’re OUT!”

But then, just as we think we have Jesus figured out on this subject, along comes this story. When Jesus has Zacchaeus in his sights, trapped in the tree like a fugitive chased by hounds, with everyone in Jericho circling the base of tree looking up and scowling up at him; just when everyone, including Zacchaeus, is preparing to hear Jesus hurl a “hell-fire and damnation” curse upon him; Jesus does the unthinkable, and for some, the unforgivable—he invites the worst sinner in town, this sawed-off shyster of a man, to share a meal. Three strikes against him,
and yet Jesus invites him to run the bases for a homerun! No one, I mean, no one, saw that coming.

Here is the best part of the story. At dinner, surrounded by a crowd of dumbfounded disciples, joyous sinners, and murmuring religious folk, Zacchaeus stood and announced to Jesus that he had decided to do something outrageous, something uncalculated, something generous. This tax collector, who had cheated everyone in town, pledged to repay anyone he had wronged four-times the amount, and on top of that, he would give half of his worldly goods to the poor. Surely he would have little, if any, portfolio after that! Notice that he did not do this because Jesus asked him, or demanded him, to do it. It was simply his exuberant response to unmerited welcome and acceptance. He did not become outrageously generous in order to earn Jesus’ favor, but because he had already received it. Now that is repentance, if ever we will see it.
For the first time in his life Zacchaeus struck a deal that would not bring him profit or power. For the first time he made a decision with money that would frustrate his accountants. Like Ebenezer Scrooge after seeing the Ghosts of Christmas, this lonely, bitter rich man felt new again, felt connected to the world around him, and realized that by God’s mercy he had lived long enough to do something beautiful with his wealth, something reconciling and healing in the world, instead of dying with nothing to show for his abundance than a big number on a spreadsheet. He finally saw that the people around him were not competitors to be squashed, or weaklings to be exploited. They were not the sources of his wealth, but the potential inheritors of it. He could leave the world blessed, instead of scarred by his life. What a beautiful chance Jesus gave this man! Makes us think about what we are doing with our own abundance, doesn’t it?

That is the point of the story. Without so much as a whisper from Jesus giving him the order to right his wrongs to society, or to distribute his wealth to those who were less powerful for the sake of making the
world more just and safe and healthy, Zacchaeus simply pushed all of his chips to the center of the table, and with a single act of audacious risk and joy, declared that he was “all in.” And at that moment, in response to Zacchaeus, Jesus said that salvation had come to that house.

Imagine that, a camel really can fit through the eye of a needle!