

"Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.' (Luke 19:1ff)

- *What a wonderful story this is, about Zacchaeus and his desire to see Jesus.* It is a favorite for many people, including children, and it's easy to tell why. Instead of being indifferent or guarded in his response to Jesus, Zacchaeus clearly wants to learn more about him. Luke doesn't tell us *how* Zacchaeus had heard about Jesus, nor about how Jesus happened to know the tax collector's name. More important to this story is *the initiative taken by Jesus when he invites himself to the man's house, and the joyful quality of Zacchaeus' reaction to their encounter.* There is much here with which we can spiritually identify, especially if we look beyond surface details.
- Despite the social ostracism it would create for him, Zacchaeus became financially allied with the Roman occupiers of his country. He probably had bid for the opportunity to collect taxes on behalf of the Imperial realm, from which he would have deducted his own taking. In the process he had become rich, *not* by shorting the Romans, but by engaging in a business that his fellow-countrymen would have thought of as a betrayal. Their criticism of him would have been *spiritual*, and *not simply about his ethics.* For his involvement with the pagan authorities would have rendered him ritually unclean, and likely prevented him from publicly worshipping in the Temple or in synagogues. *It's hard to imagine that his wealth provided sufficient compensation for his loneliness.* As an object of contempt, he would *not* have been found in a crowd, *even if he wasn't* short. And so climbing the tree not only offered him a better view, it also offered a measure of safety as compared with standing on the street.
- *We can see in Zacchaeus' circumstances two truths that apply to our lives as much as to his. Our daily involvements, like our work and our social activities, can make it hard for us to live into God's kingdom.* It might be an outright *compromise of our principles*, or our being *distracted by certain amusements.* But *both* can make it difficult for us to feel connected with God's ongoing redemptive mission in the world. And *both* can separate us from the

communities of faith that God is nurturing around us. Further, *staying with the crowd*, especially if the crowd is other than godly in its pursuits, *can make it hard for us to see who Jesus really is*. As we noticed recently, in an earlier passage in Luke, *not all those who were traveling with Jesus were actually following him*.

- It's not clear whether Luke intended *to make a point* by telling us what kind of tree Zacchaeus climbed in his effort *to see Jesus*. Yet, it seems more than a coincidence that the *ethically-challenged* and rich tax collector climbed a tree specifically associated with the prophet Amos, who was a tender of sycamore trees.¹ Like our first reading from the prophet Isaiah,² Amos' stern oracles sharply criticized the wealthy, immoral and unrighteous citizens of an earlier Israel. Whereas the prophets may have shamed their listeners into repentance, Jesus speaks *gently* to Zacchaeus. But the effect upon Zacchaeus is the same, for *he renounces his dishonest practices and promises to make more than adequate restitution for his wrongdoing*.
- *This Gospel story is all about transformation*. Jesus does not simply want to enter Zacchaeus' *house*. And it's not clear from Luke's account whether he actually does, as he presses on toward Jerusalem. But as John Shea observes, *Jesus "wants to enter into Zacchaeus' consciousness and transform it with his own consciousness. Jesus wants to dwell within him, to shape his mind according to his own."*³ In this respect, Zacchaeus stands for all of us. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, God seeks to transform *our* consciousness in just the same way that Zacchaeus experienced a powerful change.
- Notice how Jesus connects with the tax collector. *He recognizes Zacchaeus' social isolation, and crosses right over the apparent divide between them, causing everyone to grumble about it. Even the disciples!* They are among those who observe Jesus' extravagant willingness to go to the margins, as he seeks "lost sheep." For this is his mission, a mission which through us continues to search for 'the lost' in our own day.

- A further way this text applies to us builds on the way that *it is so easy for us to look upon the object of our faith from a safe remove*. We may wish to see Jesus. But, *like Zaccheaus*, we may be inclined to 'view' him from a position that keeps us from personally encountering his redemptive ministry. Jesus welcomes our interest in himself, but wants *more* from us than non-interactive observation. *"Hurry and come down," he says to us, hoping we will respond as the tax collector did, happy to welcome him*. From this, we learn that *to observe or pay attention to him, is not necessarily the same as welcoming him*. Welcoming him involves *accepting the gift* of his grace-filled presence, connecting us with God's own being as we are reconnected with our selves.
- When we accept the *abundance* of God's grace, and when we experience forgiveness and reconciliation in the Holy Spirit, we are moved to respond with that same abundance. *For everything truly important that we have is a gift, and gifts are meant to be shared*. Zacchaeus' heart is filled with the joy of one who has experienced the overcoming of a divide ~ the divide between his present life, and his longing to experience God's active presence. *So moving is his experience of reconciliation through the ministry of Jesus, that he is immediately inspired to reach out in reconciliation with others, and especially those whom he has offended*. This has direct significance for our spiritual lives. The more that I am aware of my need for grace and forgiveness, the more I am willing to share these gifts from God with other people. It also helps me to see that others are just as needy for grace and forgiveness as I am.
- I think there is wisdom in this observation: *maturity in faith corresponds with maturity in giving*. When we grow in our awareness of how much we have received, we are likely to respond with thanks. *We show our thanks by giving*. And *we give from the abundance that has been given to us*. "For all things come from you [O, Lord], and of your own have we given you."⁴ This is one of the most important ways that we were created in the image and likeness of God. *Our capacity to give mirrors God's own nature*. Through Baptism, *likeness with God in our being* is restored through grace. *Living into our Baptism, we then recover a greater likeness with God in our doing*. We offer thanks, and

make sacrificial gifts, especially as we celebrate the Eucharist. In these ways, [we become more like God as we grow into being better givers.](#)



James Tissot, *Zacchaeus in the Sycamore Tree*

Luke 19:1-10

Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through it. A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "[Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.](#)" [So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.](#) All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

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NOTES:

¹ See Amos 7:14.

² Isaiah 1:10-18.

³ John Shea, *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospels for Christian Preachers and Teachers: Year C, The Relentless Widow* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2006), p. 302.

⁴ From 1 Chronicles 29:14.