

Sinners and Saints

[Text - Luke 19:1-10]

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Regardless of who a person might be, to be scorned or rejected by others is an extremely painful experience. And to be treated by others as if you were somehow despised and rejected by *God*, can be an even more devastating blow. Fortunately, as this morning's Scripture readings reveal, the God who Jesus comes to know and proclaim, is not One who rejects or excludes. The Psalmist declares that God is "merciful and gracious...and abounding in steadfast love!" And Jesus himself commits his *life* to extending a gracious welcome to *all* people - especially those who have been rejected or shunned by their own social or religious communities. This morning we are presented an excellent example of this, in a short story, about a short man, named Zacchaeus.

Zacchaeus certainly knows the agony of being rejected. Not only is he a "despised" tax-collector, he's the *chief* tax-collector in Jericho, an important and well-traveled city in ancient Judea. Apparently, Zacchaeus has quite a widespread and disreputable reputation. Most of his fellow citizens believe that he not only makes money by collecting taxes for the hated Roman government, but that some of his wealth has been acquired by defrauding those from whom he collects. Therefore, Zacchaeus is seen not only as a traitor to his native country, but also as a low-down, corrupt swindler. And because of his shortness of stature, he's probably an easy target to identify, and to contemptuously attack. "Look, that must be Zacchaeus over there - that greedy, rotten *runt* of a tax-collector!" In light of his horrible reputation, and easy recognition, you would image that Zacchaeus would do his best to keep a low public profile.

However, one day, Zacchaeus throws all caution to the wind. He not only joins a crowd that has gathered in the streets, he also runs down the street and climbs a tree, in order to get a good look at the person who that crowd has gathered to see - Jesus of Nazareth. Of course this means that everybody can now see Zacchaeus, who has literally "gone out on a limb" just to catch a glimpse of this remarkable Rabbi. When Jesus sees this comical figure, of a grown man perched like a parrot on a tree branch, he stops and calls him *by name*. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down!" [How Jesus knows who Zacchaeus is, is hard to say. Some suggest it's because of Jesus' amazing power of divination; but more likely he knew this little tax-collector because of his horrible reputation.] Yet in spite of - or perhaps *because* of - this horrendous reputation, Jesus not only calls Zacchaeus by name, he also announces that he would be delighted to stay as a guest in his home!

Of course, this totally ticks-off the local townspeople. Of all the fine and decent citizens in Jericho with whom to stay, why would Jesus pick this little loser? That seems like a terrible choice; but actually it's a terrific choice, considering Jesus' understanding of the extravagant welcome of Divine Love and Grace. It isn't the good or popular people of Jericho who need befriending; it's this little, disreputable tax collector, who may not have a single friend in that entire town. Yet Jesus chooses to befriend him; because he sees him, not as a small and shady tax-collector; but as a vulnerable and hurting child of God.

By seeing Zacchaeus as a genuine child of God, calling him by name, and asking him to open-up his home to him, Jesus helps Zacchaeus open-up his heart to God. Realizing that Jesus sees him as a child of Abraham and Sarah - a child of Divine Promise - Zacchaeus suddenly becomes empowered to see himself in that same way. And he is profoundly moved. In fact, he is so moved that he decides then and there to change his ways; to make amends for any wrongs he might

have done; and to begin to *really live* his life, as a faithful and generous child of God. Zacchaeus is deeply touched by the Divine Compassion and Grace that Jesus extends to him. It's an experience which dramatically transforms his entire life.

So, what does all this have to do with you and me today? I believe that when you and I take the time to really *look* at the people around us, we will recognize that there are those who feel completely rejected, lonely and lost. They may not be as easy to spot as a grown man perched on a tree branch in the middle of town, but they *will* be recognizable. Others may even point them out to us, by letting us know what pathetic losers they are. Yet you and I must be willing to look at them through the eyes of Divine Compassion, and recognize that each of these vulnerable and hurting individuals, is a completely loved and accepted child of God. I certainly know that this is far easier said than done, but I also know that it's what we are called to do.

In the Divine scheme of things, there are no "nobodies!" There are no "rejected" people! *All* people - saints and sinners alike - are welcomed members of God's One, Inclusive Family. Therefore, it is critical that we learn to look out for one another *as* a family, making a special effort to protect and support *any* of our sisters or brothers who have been rejected, shunned or bullied by others. For while people may differentiate between "sinners" and "saints", Jesus Christ does not. And as members of Christ's Extended Community, you and I must take a strong stand against any individual or organization that attempts to use Christ's name to promote their own bigotries or hatreds.

Jesus says that "The Son of Man *came*, to seek and to save the lost." That's a profound statement! Because if Jesus came specifically to seek and save the lost, that means that there is *no one* beyond the scope of Christ's compassionate care. Nor is there any reason for anyone to try to hide from Christ's Saving Presence, or that Divine Light which he embodies. We *can* try to hide from that Divine Light - because of our fears, our doubts, our own inner darkness, or our personal experiences of being rejected or hurt. We can build emotional barriers, in an attempt to separate ourselves from God, and from others. Or, like Zacchaeus, you and I can choose to go out on a limb, in an effort to see and experience the Life-Changing Presence of Jesus Christ - The One who is able to find the most positive possibilities in the most unlikely places and people - The One who calls us out of our fear and hiding, inviting us to live in a refreshingly new and liberated way.

Jesus chose to live in the way of openness and inclusion, compassion and peace; which is not an easy way to live, nor a popular one. Yet he was totally convinced that this *is* the Way of God. By faithfully following that Way, Jesus himself was often rejected and shunned, criticized and condemned, and finally nailed to a cross. Yet from that Cross, comes a message of immeasurable forgiveness, acceptance and love. And beyond that Cross, comes the hope and promise of New and Everlasting Life.

This morning, in this very place, the living, moving Spirit of Christ continues to call out to you and me, offering us a vision of a better world. A world where the lowly are raised-up, the hungry are fed, the outcast are protected, and where *all* are welcomed and included. Inspired by that vision, you and I, like Zacchaeus, can also go out on a limb: opening our hearts, our homes, and our lives to welcome-in the Christ - and thereby welcome-in others - with compassion, generosity, and overflowing joy!