

## Isn't That a Tufted Tax-Collector?

[Text - Luke 19:1-10]

Pastor Dave Shackle

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One of Life's most emotionally painful experiences, is to be shunned or rejected by others. It can happen in our childhood, when we just don't seem to fit in anywhere. It can happen in our old age, when we just don't seem to matter anymore. It can even happen in the prime of our lives, when the company we've loyally served for years, abruptly fires us. No matter who we are - whatever our situation - the hurt of being rejected is extremely hard to handle. And perhaps the most traumatic rejection for a person to endure, is to be rejected by one's own faith community. Being pushed away by those who should be offering us support; being treated as if we are somehow unacceptable to *God*- can feel like the ultimate rejection. Fortunately, however, as this morning's readings indicate, the Holy One who Jesus reveals, doesn't reject or exclude - but, rather, is "merciful and gracious...and abounding in steadfast love!" And Jesus himself is highly committed to extending a gracious welcome to anyone who has been rejected or shunned by their family of faith.

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 city in ancient Judea. As such, Zacchaeus has a widespread, albeit dismal reputation. Most of his fellow citizens believe that in addition to collecting taxes for the hated Roman government, he has also acquired a good deal of wealth for himself, by defrauding those from whom he collects. Therefore, Zacchaeus isn't only seen as a traitor to his native country, but also as a low-down, sleazy swindler. And because of his shortness of stature, he'd certainly be an easy target to identify - and attack. "Look, that must be Zacchaeus over there - that greedy, rotten *runt* of a tax-collector! Lock him up! Lock him up!" Because of his horrible reputation, one would image that Zacchaeus would try to keep a low profile. Nevertheless, one day he throws all caution to the wind. Not only does Zacchaeus join a crowd that is gathering in the street, he also climbs a tree, in order to get a good look at the person who that crowd has come to see - Jesus of Nazareth. Of course this means that everybody can now see - and openly ridicule - Zacchaeus, who has literally "gone out on a limb" just to catch a glimpse of this remarkable Rabbi.

When Jesus sees this comical figure - a little man, perched in a tree like a tiny tufted tax-collector - he stops and calls him, *by name*. "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down!" Now, how Jesus knows who Zacchaeus is, is hard to say. Some suggest it's because of Jesus' amazing power of divination. More likely, it's because of Zacchaeus' horrible reputation, which extends far beyond Jericho. Yet in spite of - or perhaps *because* of - this awful reputation, Jesus not only calls Zacchaeus by name, he also announces that he would like to stay as a guest in Zacchaeus' home. Of course, this totally ticks-off the local townspeople. Of all the good 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, in light of Jesus' commitment to the message and mission of Divine Love and

Grace. After all, it isn't the respectable or popular people of Jericho who need befriending; it's this diminutive, disreputable tax collector, who may not have a single friend in that entire town or region. 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 the Holy One. *Realizing* that Jesus sees him as a child of Abraham and Sarah - a child of Divine Promise - Zacchaeus is empowered to see himself in that same way. And he's profoundly moved! In fact, he's so moved that he decides then and there to change his ways; to make amends for any wrongs he has done; and to begin to actually *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; and it 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 realize that there are those who feel totally rejected, lonely and lost. They may not be as easy to spot as a grown man perched on a tree branch, 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 are called to look at them through the eyes of Divine Compassion and Grace, and to recognize that each of these vulnerable and hurting individuals is a loved and accepted child of God.

In the Divine scheme of things, there are no "nobodies!" No matter how big or small, young or old - regardless of one's life situation - we are all members of God's inclusive and interconnected Family. Therefore, it's important that we learn to look-out for one another *as* a family; and make a special effort to protect and support any of our sisters and brothers who are rejected, shunned or bullied by others. And as followers of Jesus Christ, you and I are called to stand-up against any individual or organization that attempts to use Christ's name to promote their own bigotry, hatred, or divisiveness. Jesus says that he came "to seek and to save *the lost!*" - indicating that there is *no one* beyond the scope of Christ's love; nor is there any reason for anyone to try to hide from Christ's Saving Presence and Redeeming Light.

Sometimes because of our own fears or failures, doubts or inner darkness, we will try to hide from that Divine Light and Presence. Because of our personal experiences of being rejected or hurt, we put-up barriers in an attempt to protect ourselves from others, or even from God. In times like these, we should remember the example of Zacchaeus, who was willing to "go out on a limb" in order to see and experience the loving and gracious Christ - the One who calls us out of our fear and hiding, and invites us to live openly, courageously, and compassionately.

Jesus choose to live a life of openness and inclusion, compassion and peace; which isn't always an easy way to

live, nor a popular one. Yet he is totally convinced that this *is* the Way of the holy One. 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 and love. And beyond that Cross, comes the hope and promise of New and Everlasting Life.

Today, the living, loving 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 protected, and where *all* are welcomed and included. Inspired by that vision, you and I, like Zacchaeus, can open our hearts, our homes, and our lives to welcome-in the Christ. We *do* this by welcoming those most vulnerable “little ones” who truly need our help, our compassion, our help, and our care!