

October 30, 2022

Wisdom 11:22 – 12:2

Psalm 145

2 Thessalonians 1:11 – 2:2

Luke 19:1-10

My earliest memory of Luke's Gospel story about Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus comes from a children's book. Many years ago, Betty and I had a series of children's bible story books that we read to our young sons at bedtime. For whatever reason, Zacchaeus is the only one of these books that I still remember. In the illustrations of that book Zacchaeus was portrayed as a pleasant fellow – smiling, short, fat, and bald. The narrative of him climbing a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus was cute and funny. That depiction of Zacchaeus may have been appropriate for a children's book, but I am pretty sure it was not accurate, and it certainly did not serve very well the purpose of the evangelist in telling this story.

The image of Zacchaeus that we should take from this Gospel is anything but cute and funny. Zacchaeus was undoubtedly despised by others in the crowd. He was a chief tax collector, which tells us that he worked for the hated Roman occupiers. He was wealthy, and his wealth almost certainly came from skimming the taxes that he and his henchmen collected from the people. He would not have cheated the Romans, however. That would have been far too risky. So, he probably collected from his fellow Jews even more tax than the outrageous amounts they were assessed by Romans, and he kept the difference for himself. Climbing the tree to see Jesus was most likely driven not by faith, but by curiosity and greed. It was just one more example of Zacchaeus seeking an advantage over his neighbors. But Jesus saw more in this man. In addition to the obvious curiosity and greed, Jesus saw in Zacchaeus an opportunity for repentance and redemption.

To help us better explore the story of Zacchaeus, I am going to borrow from the

Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Saint Ignatius taught his followers, who we know today as Jesuits, to place themselves in Holy Scripture. So, let us each imagine ourselves in Jericho that day, members of the crowd gathered along the road waiting for Jesus. As Jesus approaches, some guy bullies his way through the crowd and climbs a tree to get a better view. What a jerk, you may be thinking. Now, imagine that the jerk in the tree is not Zacchaeus, but he is the most despicable person you know, or know of. Keep the name of this despicable person to yourself. I don't want to start any political arguments in church. When Jesus reaches the tree, he looks up and says, "Despicable person, come down! I am staying at your house tonight." You have got to be kidding, you may say to yourself. Of all the good and honest people (like me) with whom Jesus could stay, he picks this guy. And to make matters worse, despicable person comes down from the tree and promises to give half of his possessions to the poor and to repay four times anything he may have swindled from others. And Jesus believes him! So, how do you feel now? Angry? Jealous? Resentful? Others in the crowd obviously had those same feelings. The Gospel tells us that the crowd began to grumble, saying, "He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner." Yes, indeed he has. But this was a sinner who repented and promised restitution for any injury caused by his sins. What about the other sinners in this story – the self-righteous people in the crowd, including ourselves, who felt no need to repent? We can be so quick to condemn the sins of others that we overlook our own sins, especially our sins of judgement and condemnation.

As Jesus approached Jericho, he undoubtedly knew about the sins of Zacchaeus, but he also knew his potential to be transformed. Instead of attacking Zacchaeus and condemning him, Jesus showed him mercy. By inviting himself to Zacchaeus' house, Jesus gave him the opportunity to turn away from his sins and make amends for the hurts he had inflicted on others. Zacchaeus responded to Jesus' mercy

and thus accepted salvation. As always, Jesus was in a teaching mode that day. But the object of his lesson was not Zacchaeus. It was the crowd, and that includes each one of us. Jesus is teaching us to understand that we may not always know the whole story. He calls us to be patient with one another, and offer mercy, just as God is patient with all of us and shows us mercy.

Our first reading today from the Book of Wisdom is an eloquent reflection on the Lord's unimaginable power, which is manifest in the enormity and beauty of creation. As great as that power is, however, it is eclipsed by the Lord's immense love for every single thing that the Lord has created. And God gives us the responsibility to care for all that God has created – all people and all things. In recent times two encyclicals by Pope Francis have reminded us of that responsibility. *Laudato Si* – On Care for our Common Home shows us how all things are connected and how we must care for all of God's creation. *Fratelli Tutti* – On Fraternity and Social Friendship shows us how all people are connected and how we must care for one another. If you have not read these inspiring documents, I encourage you to do so. I also encourage you to take a minute and re-read today's Wisdom reading which tells us that God shows love for all things through mercy. For anyone who grew up knowing only a judgmental God, it might even be mind-blowing to read that God "overlooks people's sins that they may repent." To conclude this reading, the author wrote the following words about the Lord's patience and mercy, "...you rebuke offenders little by little, warn them and remind them of the sins they are committing, that they may abandon their wickedness and believe in you." All of us are called to show that same patience with and mercy to others, even to the most despicable people we know.