

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Last week, we revisited the parable of Jesus about the separate prayers by the Pharisee and the tax collector. It was a story made up by Jesus. But, if we recall, he uses the person of the tax collector to make a point...not gently, or subtly.....but rather like a bomb blast. A howitzer. Like that clap of thunder and its searing and blinding shock of light, in the middle of the night, that seems to hit right outside your door.

We do not get it, in the day and age of the hum-drum regularity of wage withholding...the money we do not really see so we otherwise forget. We just have the numbing, once-a-year interaction with tax accountants and preparers, or even on-line. So, for most of us, tax time is just a longer period of inconvenience, but otherwise a nuisance. A bother. A blip on the screen. A speed bump.

But not for the Jewish hearers of Jesus. The blood-sucking tax collectors profited off their own countrymen, raising the funds needed to finance the brutal repression of God's chosen people by the pagans, the accursed Roman conquerors. So, these dogs were beyond all hope.....repugnant to all decent, God-fearing people. They were the enemies of God Himself.

Now, this week, Jesus turns from his parable or story....into reality. Now, we have a flesh and blood example in Zacchaeus...and he is worse than the others. There is absolutely NO hope for him because he is called the CHIEF tax collector...and he has done a particularly good job of extorting money from his countryman, for Luke 19:1 says he was a wealthy man.

I am thinking of a contemporary parallel. How about that drugged-out guy in the Town of Annsville some years ago who took a shotgun and blew away his infant son even while he held him in front of the horrified state troopers? Can you get any further away from God than that? Well, that is where Zacchaeus is as well.

There was something however....something about this Jesus who was coming to Jericho...so Zacchaeus just had to "see what he was like." Something inside him was pulling him to also come out into the street and see this common-looking carpenter. Which tells us that he was still hungry for and open to something more in life...and he was willing to look the fool to find it. God seldom becomes important or real to the comfortable, the self-satisfied.

It is only when we are still sensitive to some emptiness this world cannot fill, only when we still long for some transcendence in our life, some tie to the eternal, that God becomes available. "If with all your heart you truly seek me..." writes the prophet. And Zacchaeus was willing to run ahead and climb a tree. So, for all his wealth and comfort, he was still searching.

He had heard of the man of Nazareth, that he was something special, someone from God, and he had to see him....and he swallowed his pride of bearing and ran, on ahead of the mob, to a sycamore tree

which he climbed, high in the overarching branches, a ridiculous sight hanging there in the middle of the street.

And while he is hanging up there, embarrassed and hungry, God comes to him. That is what this story is really all about, how God enters our life. Even as a prophet, Jesus teaches about God not only in words, but by how he acts. Jesus acts out the way his Father works in this world.

And what do we see here? Not a God who is passive and distant and impersonal and judging. Rather, a God who pursues us in love and acceptance and embrace as we are ready for him, open to his presence, available to his friendship.

The tug that Zacchaeus felt was the grace of God drawing him to his Son...and Zacchaeus not only dropped what he was doing, but went to great lengths to respond to this inner prompting of grace. He had a hard time seeing, for he was “small of stature,” so he tried to run in front of the crowd, and ultimately climbed a sycamore tree to get a good view of the celebrity. There were many in the crowd, but Jesus zeroed right in on the short man in the tree. He had never met him, but called him by name: “Zacchaeus, hurry down, for I mean to stay at your house today.”

To understand how shocking this was, consider that Jews made themselves ritually impure by entering the house of a public sinner. But this, of course, was not any Jew...a sinner could not make Jesus impure. Rather, he would purify the sinner. Jesus saw past his crimes to his heart, which was open to the grace that prompted him to climb that tree. Inviting himself to the tax-collector’s home meant an offer of forgiveness, mercy, acceptance by God.

We miss something of the power of this story because eating together no longer has the same symbolic and social power that it had in that time, and still has in more traditional cultures. In the day of Jesus, to eat with someone was to offer him the most intimate form of friendship, was to allow him into one’s community and circle which is why the uproar among literally the whole town of Jericho. “He has gone to be to be the dinner guest of one who is a sinner,” that is, someone who is outside, who does not belong to them or to God, clearly outside the love of God. It is entirely fair to say that Jesus was finally killed because of his eating habits, his determination to include those whom everybody else had excluded out.

People knew this and were stunned. They began to grumble. But Zacchaeus stood his ground. He was determined not to lose his chance at redemption. He instinctively knew that accepting Jesus into his home meant that his life had to change. His wealth had come at the expense of his people. Clinging to it would mean letting Jesus go, and he had to choose. “I give half my belongings, Lord, to the poor. If I have defrauded anyone in the least, I pay him back fourfold.”

Notice that he did not buy his forgiveness through this almsgiving. He had already been offered mercy. Salvation comes to Zacchaeus not by his initiative, but by God’s. Grace moved him out to the

street and up the tree and the offer to do lunch together...and yet, he could have declined the offer.

God is not about forced entry. The door must be opened from the inside.

We must make the decision to yield to His mercy and receive the gift. And to receive the gift means that our hands

The God that Jesus portrays is a God who turns aside and takes a chance, who pursues, embraces, forgives before he demands. This story is a word to Zacchaeus and to you and me that no matter how we have messed up, no matter how downhill the day has gone, no matter how we have tended like Zacchaeus to put our own survival first, God does not abandon us.

We are welcomed unconditionally, just as we are, by the most important person in our life, our God...the God in Jesus, come to dinner. The God who accepts and embraces just as we are. But then there follows another, somewhat sobering note....we can tell when this God has come to dinner, by whether anything is happening to us. The test of our trust in God's love is whether we find ourselves loving like Jesus, reaching out beyond our crowd to the outsider, the lonely, the lost ourselves. Jesus has not asked this of him, but before he can, Zacchaeus reaches out. It is the transforming power of the love of God taken seriously. The language makes it clear that he is doing far more than conventional morality requires....there is no law in the book that requires anything like that. But Zacchaeus no longer worries much about his own life, and out of gratitude for the generosity of Jesus, he has become a generous and giving human being....by the only power that really changes anyone, the power of relationship freely given and gratefully received.

You can tell who has really encountered the love of God. Like Jesus they are always growing, changing, stretching, giving, including, embracing. May we each come to be blessed with the drive of Zacchaeus, as well as the courage that only comes from God to let it happen...all in the name of our loving and ever forgiving God, known to us as the Father and as the Son and as the Holy Spirit.

Amen.