

This morning, let's look at a story from the Gospel of Luke. Luke was a Gentile; and he has the unique distinction of being the only New Testament writer who was not a Jew. He was also a doctor by profession, and maybe this fact gave him the sense of compassion shown throughout his gospel. It has been said that a minister sees people at their best; a lawyer sees people at their worst; and a doctor sees people as they really are. Luke saw people and loved them all. A major theme throughout the Gospel of Luke is that salvation is offered to all who will believe in Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. And this is clearly demonstrated in our story this morning which is taken from the 19<sup>th</sup> chapter of Luke, the first ten verses.

Read Luke 19:1-10

Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector, most likely over a whole district. He stood at the top of the collection pyramid with other agents reporting to him; sort of like Amway. At this time in history, the tax collector's income was based on how much extra money that they could extract or cheat from their fellow citizens beyond what they legally owed the hated Roman government. Being the chief tax collector, Zacchaeus was thus very wealthy and greatly despised by his Jewish neighbors who considered him a traitor, because he worked for the Romans. Of course, things have not changed much today, I don't think tax collectors or the IRS are at the top of your Christmas card list. You may have heard that the only difference between death and taxes is that death does not get worse every time Congress meets.

Now the name Zacchaeus meant "pure, innocent, just, and righteous;" yet this man had become a corrupt and despicable tax collector. His neighbors did not see him as pure and just, but rather as a cutthroat, robber, cheat, and traitor. This background is important to understanding why the crowd reacted as they did to Jesus' desire to have lunch with Zacchaeus.

As Jesus made His way through the streets of Jericho, Zacchaeus longed to get a glimpse of this famous teacher that he had heard so much about. However, because of his height, Zacchaeus was unable to see over the crowd, and of course, because nobody liked him, they would not let him get near the front. However, Zacchaeus may have been short in height, but not in resourcefulness; so he ran ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to get a better view.

As Jesus walked down the street, He spotted Zacchaeus up in the tree. So He stopped and looked up into the tree and said: "Zacchaeus, come down, I want to have lunch with you today." Here was Jesus being Jesus; this was the very reason that He came to live among us. Remember the words of John 3:17 – "For God sent not His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved." Jesus had come to seek and save those who were lost, and Zacchaeus was definitely one of the lost. In our text "lost" does not mean

damned or doomed; it simply means in the wrong place. A person is lost when they have wandered away from God.

Zacchaeus gladly welcomed Jesus into his home that day. He had initially just wanted to catch a glimpse of this famous teacher, but now he had the opportunity to dine with Him face to face; to get to know Him; to have a personal relationship with Jesus. However, the religious leaders quickly labeled Jesus as a sinner for associating with the likes of Zacchaeus. There is no doubt that Zacchaeus was a sinner, but remember unlike the religious leaders back then and some churches today, Jesus never writes off sinners; thank be to God! Instead, Jesus reaches out with the grace of God and calls all of us to share a meal with Him, to commune with Him.

This powerful story illustrates the initiative that Jesus takes with sinners and all who are lost. He reaches out to accept us where we are, inviting us to come back to God. Zacchaeus demonstrated how one should properly respond to the invitation of the Good News. He recognized his failures and confessed his sins. He sought to make restitution for all the people that he had cheated; to refund all that he had cheated his neighbors out of. This must have really shocked the locals because to them people like Zacchaeus never change. But nothing is impossible for God. Because of Jesus' invitation, Zacchaeus had a change of heart, adopted a new life, and embarked on a new direction. The transformation of his heart towards God is an example for all to see and copy.

In the time we have remaining this morning, let's look at a few key observations from this story. First, note that Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name. Can you imagine how Zacchaeus must have felt? I bet that he was not used to anyone calling him by his first name; he had probably been called many other names that we can't repeat in church, but Jesus called him by name. Of all the people in that crowd that day who came to see Jesus, we only have a record of Jesus calling Zacchaeus by name. And the good news is that Jesus knows each of our names too – yours and mine. Remember that in John 10:3 Jesus identifies Himself as the Good Shepherd who calls each of His sheep by name, especially those who are lost.

There is a legend that Jesus may have known Zacchaeus before He arrived in Jericho. Zacchaeus was a tax collector, and so was one of the disciples, Matthew. When Matthew began to follow Jesus, one of the first things that he may have done was to gather together those of his own social and professional network and told them about Jesus. He might have also said to Jesus: "Master, if we ever go through Jericho, I want to introduce You to my friend Zacchaeus." Thus, Zacchaeus may have been invited to dine with Jesus because of Matthew's desire to make sure that his friends had the same opportunity to know and love Jesus as he did.

We are also called to invite others – family, friends and acquaintances – to meet the Lord, to come to His table and dine with Him. It is our Christian duty to share with others the joy and

blessedness that we have found. I'm pretty sure that every one of us knows a Zacchaeus; someone who needs to be introduced to the Lord.

Zacchaeus went out into the streets of Jericho searching for something that was missing in his life. Like Zacchaeus there are people all around us who are searching for happiness, peace of mind, and the love that only God through Jesus Christ can offer. If you have even been lost in the woods, you know that it's a good idea to find a high place to look over the landscape and to get your bearings. So Zacchaeus climbed up the sycamore tree because he was lost and was looking for the answer to life. And he found it in Jesus Christ. You know there are people all over Rio Rancho who are perched in trees so to speak, looking for the same answer. Jesus is calling us to find them and to tell them to come down and dine with us at the Table of the Lord.

In this story, Zacchaeus is seen in three different ways: first, there's the tax collector that his neighbors and the people of Jericho despised and called a sinner; then there's the person that Zacchaeus thinks he is, having all the wealth and pleasures of life, but unhappy because something is missing; and finally, there is the man that Jesus saw. Each thought that they saw the true Zacchaeus; but who was right? The Zacchaeus that Jesus saw was the true Zacchaeus, and thus he turned out to be Zacchaeus of infinite possibilities. In the same way, there are three persons in each of us: the person that others see – the outer you; the one you see – the inner you; and the one Jesus sees – the potential you.

Everything depends on which "You" you focus on. If you focus on the "You" that those around you see - your family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers, you will be in bondage to what others think about you. Your actions and decisions will be based on pleasing others, making sure that they always like you and think highly of you. Your self-esteem will be based on the opinions of others; what they think about you. Your focus will be on fitting in and not standing out.

Now if you focus on the "You" you know, yourself, then you will be discouraged. Of course, there are exceptions, there are those with a huge ego, who think highly of themselves; you know the perfect ones; those who are legends in their own minds. But most of us have some skeletons in our closet, something that we are ashamed of or feel guilty about. I don't think many of us could stand up to the scrutiny of running for public office today. If we focus on ourselves, we will be trapped in our self-illusions and disappointed.

But there is the third "You" that Jesus sees. As Jesus saw potential in tax collectors like Matthew and Zacchaeus, a hard-headed fisherman like Peter, a doubter like Thomas, and a Pharisee named Saul, He also sees potential in you and me. Jesus loves us, even as we are, but He does not want to leave us where we are. Jesus sees what we can become if we will only give Him control of our lives and walk in faith as He leads us to greater heights and life as it was intended to be lived.

Antonio, a sculptor, chipped away at a large stone and could do nothing with it; so he tossed it away. Later Michael Michelangelo took the same stone and carved one of the greatest statues of all times, the statue of David. Unlike Antonio, he saw potential in the stone. Are you satisfied with who you think you are? If not, then give control of your life to Jesus and watch what He will do. Jesus sees potential in all of us. 1 Corinthians 2:9 states: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him."

When life has driven us up a tree because of its demands, worries, disappointments, problems, hurts, and broken promises and relationships; when we feel lost and all alone; when we feel separated from God; when we are still seeking to know the Lord better, Jesus calls us each by name to come down out of the tree and to dine at His table, to receive and experience His grace and our salvation, bought for and paid for on the cross at Calvary with His blood and body that we remember this morning in the sacrament of Holy Communion. Jesus looks directly into our eyes and hearts, seeking us out of the crowd, calling us by name, and offering us an invitation.

By accepting His invitation, we too like Zacchaeus can know the hope, love, grace and salvation that Jesus generously gives to everyone who responds. So let us now join Zacchaeus and all the other lost souls of this world and prepare to come to God's Table and experience the presence of the Lord. Come down from your tree and dine with the Lord; open your heart to Him and let Him change your life. Amen