

Last week we talked about "saints," and how a saint is not a perfect person but anybody who lets God's love shine through his or her life for someone else. That's being set apart as a person willing to be an instrument of God's love.

Today we heard the story of Jesus inviting himself to the home of tax-collector Zacchaeus when he spied Zacchaeus perched in a tree, trying to see over the crowd.

Last week we saw another tax collector, one asking God for mercy as he prayed. So we know already that tax collectors were HATED by the people from whom they collected taxes. For one thing, they worked for the occupying Romans; for another, they pressured tax-payers to pay more than the Romans wanted so that they, the tax collectors, could get rich.

Today's tax collector, Zacchaeus, apparently could not see over the crowd gathering around Jesus; it seems that he was a short man. So in his usual weasel-like fashion, Zacchaeus climbed up into a tree, probably pushing others aside in order to get to it. As Jesus walked past the tree, he noticed this man and knew his name and probably everything about him. Jesus stopped, looked up at him, and told Zacchaeus to come down, because Jesus was going to eat lunch at his house!

Can you imagine this happening to you? You're spending your day trying to make a buck, dealing with people who don't like you, probably being pushed around a bit and surely pushing back a lot, trying to get what you want by stepping over or on others, when Jesus Christ calls to you, by name, and tells you to stop what you're doing and let him come to your house for a bite of lunch. I would be floored! How did Jesus know my name? How can he invite himself into my messy house? I haven't vacuumed, there are piles of stuff everywhere, probably dirty dishes in the sink, and the house surely smells like animals... I don't have time to clean it up, and I don't know what to feed him... All the reasons I *cannot* let Jesus come into my house overwhelm me. I can imagine stammering, "Jesus, I would love to take you to lunch, but let's go to a restaurant..." I would be too ashamed and feel too vulnerable for the Lord to see where I live.

Now it may be that you would have no problem opening your home to a surprise visitor and that hosting a lunch comes easily for you. But it is likely that *something* would and does get in the way when it comes to really letting Jesus into our lives. Just knowing what happened in today's story may give us pause, because Zacchaeus was profoundly changed by Jesus, and because of those changes, his life became a prime example of the power of our Lord to work in and through the lives of people. It may be that we don't really want to have to make changes.

Imagine that you are a bystander in Jesus' day. It is midday in the marketplace.

Suddenly the crowd lurches as a mob of people move through the center of the street. People are talking, shouting, reaching out to the man in the center, who seems able to be attentive to everyone at once. It is Jesus, the Galilean, the healer. Suddenly he stops, the crowd halts around him, and there is deafening silence as Jesus scans the branches of the tree where a man in fine robes is perched. Laughter breaks out in the crowd as they recognize the creature in the

tree. Someone nearby whispers, "That dog Zacchaeus is going to get what he deserves now. Jesus is always a friend to the powerless, which means this cheating tax collector is about to get his due!"

The man in the tree is obviously uncomfortable, for he had climbed the tree only to catch a glimpse of, not to be confronted by, Jesus. He looks sort of pathetic, like a treed animal. The crowd waits for Jesus to give this despicable little runt the telling off he deserves for the way he has treated so many of his fellow countryfolk.

Jesus looks up into the tree and says simply, "Zacchaeus, come down. Let's have lunch; I'm coming to your house." Jesus knows his name. Jesus will go home with him.

The crowd is in shock. Why would this Jesus, who cared about the poor and healed the sick, have anything to do with this despicable man? Zacchaeus, the epitome of someone who was profiting off the misery of others, ended up totally changed by Jesus becoming part of his life. Zacchaeus went from "Pay up!" to "I will repay in multiples those I have cheated and hurt." When Jesus Christ speaks our names and comes into our "homes," our lives are changed, and others are able to see that God really is still powerfully at work in this world and in human lives.

This is the essence of Luke's Gospel: in Jesus Christ, God is at work doing outrageous and surprising things. God is bringing in the upside down kingdom, turning enemies into friends, transforming moral midgets into ethical giants, recycling the discarded, giving new life to both the oppressor and the oppressed. God continues to do this work in lives today.

C.S. Lewis has a helpful illustration. He suggested that in the incarnation, Jesus was like a diver. He is God in heaven looking down into this dark, slimy, murky water. That's our sinful, polluted world. God jumped in, getting himself wet. And then God came up again, dripping, but holding the precious thing he went down to recover. That precious thing was Zacchaeus, and that precious thing is you and me. All the sinners who have trusted in Christ. That's how we get out of the slime of tax collecting, or cheating, or lusting, or hating, or whatever other self-destructive sins we are buried in. God in Christ descended down into the slime and rescued us. Resolutions and vows to be better won't help by themselves. We don't have the power to keep them. We are stuck on the sea bottom. We have no power of our own to get up or out. All we can do is cry out for God's grace to lift us up, to rescue us. (From a sermon by Raymond Cannata, "A Surprising Resolution." )

And one more story, shared by Wayne Rice (*Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks*), may help us to appreciate what happened to Zacchaeus and see our own lives in new light. The O'Learys and the MacMillans lived as neighbors at the turn of the century. One day a young man in a suit came to their village to explain that they would soon be able to have electricity for the first time. The MacMillans responded with their typical enthusiasm and filled out the appropriate papers to have their house wired. The O'Learys were more cautious. After all, they had lived for generations without electricity and had managed just fine. They weren't about to throw money after every passing fad. So they decided to wait. If electricity was as good as everyone

said, they could always sign up later.

In the weeks that followed, the MacMillans busily prepared their house for electrical power. They clamped wires and sockets to the walls and hung bulbs from the ceiling.

When the big day finally came, the MacMillans invited their neighbors, including the O'Learys, to a grand lighting party. With a dramatic flourish, Mr. MacMillan threw a switch and the bulbs began to glow for the first time. The MacMillan house was illuminated more brightly than it had ever been lit before.

There was a gasp. "How lovely!" someone said.

Then another gasp. "How filthy!" someone else said.

It was true. No one had noticed it before in the dim light, but years of oil lamps had left a film of dingy soot over everything. The walls were grimy, there were cobwebs in the corners, and dust covered the floor.

The O'Learys decided right then and there that they would *never* install electricity in their home. They would never suffer the humiliation of having their dirty home exposed by the light.

After the party, the MacMillans went to work. They scrubbed the soot off the walls and ceiling, cleaned the cobwebs, and swept away the dust. They had indeed been embarrassed by their dirty home when the lights came on, but within a day their house was cleaner than it had ever been before..

Meanwhile, the O'Learys continued to live comfortably in their dimly lit home filled with soot, cobwebs, and filth. (*Hot Illustrations for Youth Talks 4*, p. 24, Wayne Rice)

Some of us may be afraid to let Jesus Christ really come into our lives, since he is the Light of the World. When Zacchaeus let Jesus into his life, he ended up cleaning up his act. He paid back those he had cheated four-fold. He found out that letting Jesus in not only brings blessing, it also makes us see what we need to change in order to really live.

We are not perfect people, always full of love and warm feelings. There is much in life that seems unfair and that makes us tight with anger. Much in our world causes us to feel powerless or afraid. And there are lots of things each of us doesn't like about ourselves and the way we react to others in our lives. But Jesus came to seek and save the lost! Jesus looks us in the eyes, calls us by name, and invites us to let him come home with us. He sees everything about us, loves us anyway, and offers us life. That's the gospel.

Jesus gave words of hope to a little man in a tree, words of grace to a thief on a cross, and he gives words of hope and invitation to each of us today. May we hear our Lord asking us to come down from whatever keeps us from trusting and following him, that God's love may shine through our lives and help others hear Jesus calling their names, inviting them to let him come home with them.

The invitation stands: Our Lord whispers our names and invites us to be part of his salvation work today. May we let him go home with us. Amen.