

Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C
Wis 11:22-12:2
Ps 145 *passim*
2 Thess 1:11-2:2
Lk 19:1-10

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St. Petronille Parish, Glen Ellyn
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I am reminded once again that in this 3rd year of the 3-year Lectionary cycle, we've been working our way through the Gospel of Luke. Gospel, you know, means good news. And the Good News according to St. John is very different from the others; it sort of stands on its own. The other three, the Gospels of Matthew and Mark and of Luke, are similar to each other but not identical. The Gospel of Luke, for example, contains stories that we find in none of the other Gospels. The Good Samaritan, for instance, and the Prodigal Son. And the story we just heard a few moments ago, the story of Zacchaeus, is another one of those stories we find only in Luke.

Here are a few details in the Zacchaeus story that would be easy to overlook.

- It takes place in Jericho and Luke begins by observing that Jesus was just passing through town: he didn't intend to stop there. But he was willing to change his plans on the spur of the moment.
- Second, Jesus had to look up to see Zacchaeus. When my son John was a student at Glenbard West, his class went on a field trip. With their teacher as their guide, they walked around the Chicago Loop and learned about the great architecture of the city. The teacher had to keep reminding them to look up, because our tendency at street level is to look forward and backward and side to side, but we have to be prompted to look up, and there is so much to see on the vertical, up-down axis. Jesus sees because he looks, and he's always on the lookout for us.
- And third, notice how Jesus sizes Zacchaeus up as a "descendant of Abraham." Well, sure, every Jew can claim to be descended from Abraham, but I don't think Jesus was talking about an entry in Ancestry.com. What he was getting at, I believe, is that Abraham didn't get to heaven by obeying a set of rules – the rules hadn't been written yet. No, Abraham was "justified" – got to heaven, in other words -- by believing in and loving the Lord God who later identified himself to Moses by the sacred name YHWH. Abraham rejected all the other gods that people all around were worshipping, and he embraced the Lord God YHWH. The book of Genesis (15:6) says that Abraham believed YHWH and "it was credited to him as righteousness." St. Paul later quoted that same language in his Letter to the Romans (4:22). In calling Zacchaeus a child of Abraham Jesus was praising Zacchaeus, against his accusers, for his contrition and his stated intention to do good and to make amends for his sins.

But there is yet another way in which Zacchaeus serves a model for us: he overcame the human tendency to grab for more. God is infinite –all-powerful, all-knowing, all-loving, all-just, all everything good. We, by contrast, are infinite in only one respect. Because of our wounded human nature, our human nature wounded by original sin and bearing the vestiges of original sin, we are infinite only in our desires. If an armored car pulled up to my front door and dropped off a pallet loaded with bundles of \$100 bills, I would say, “Thank you very much, and I hope you will come back again soon.” It is in our nature, our wounded nature, to always want more. We are insatiable – and, it turns out, we are always disappointed. Way back, deep in the last millennium a pop star named Peggy Lee made a lot of money singing, “Is that all there is?” Even if we’re too young to remember Peggy Lee or her song, we recognize the feeling, don’t we? “Is that all there is?” And so, we move from thing to thing, in search of true satisfaction. Eventually, if we’re lucky, it may dawn on us that none of these things is going to give us genuine happiness. And that’s a graced moment. That’s when we come to understand the prayer of St. Augustine: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

Zacchaeus wasn’t just a tax collector; he was a *chief* tax collector. That meant that he had other tax collectors working under him in his territory, and everybody got a cut. In those days the Romans would decide how much money they needed in taxes, and then entrepreneurs would compete with each other to purchase the right to collect the taxes. They would squeeze the taxpayers for all they could get and keep the profits for themselves. And they were greedy, and their greed made them cruel and heartless.

Zacchaeus turned to Jesus initially out of curiosity. He wanted to see this great big celebrity. Jesus spotted him and invited himself into his life. Zacchaeus accepted Jesus’s invitation, and that acceptance changed him. He resolved to give away half of the wealth he had accumulated, and to compensate generously everyone he had cheated.

Our first reading today, from the Book of Wisdom, tells us that everything that comes directly from the hands of the Creator is good, and God gives it all to us for our use and enjoyment. Everything we have we have from God’s bounty. Pope Saint John Paul II taught that private property is a human right, and Pope John Paul added that everything we own is subject to what he called “a social mortgage.” It is for our use and enjoyment, yes, but, like Zacchaeus, we must also take care of the poor and the vulnerable. Never may we shut our ears to the cries of the poor; never may we forget the needs of the poor and the suffering.