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AMDG

Proper 26C, Pentecost 24 - October 30, 2016

So, who would you put in the Sycamore tree? Who is your Zacchaeus? Who is the most despicable, most contemptible, most unforgivable person you can think of? Now imagine that person as Zacchaeus in this Gospel. Because in order to fully grasp it, we need to be able to put this Gospel in our own context. Otherwise it's just a comical little story of Jesus looking kindly on a short wealthy man. In fact, when I mentioned to Elizabeth that this was going to be the Gospel this Sunday, she broke out into a cute little song, "Zacchaeus was a wee little man." I'd never heard it before. And, I'm not going to sing it to you today. First, because I don't know it as well as my wife, but second, it misses the important point being made in the Gospel today.

Zacchaeus wasn't just a wee little man, he was about as low as you could go in terms of how he was seen by the Jewish people. Tax collectors in Jesus' time were public contractors, it's where the word publican comes from. And, they oversaw Roman projects and business interests. They were tax collectors, but they also expropriated land for Roman use, drafted peasants into armies of laborers for their grandiose construction projects. And they made their living by overcharging when they collected taxes and fees for the Romans and Herodeans. They were shameless exploiters of the people Israel. In fact the Gospel says Zacchaeus was the chief tax collector. So, not only was he stealing from his people; he was probably stealing from the other tax collectors under him. It may be hard for us to put this in our own contexts, because we're not under the oppressive arm of an invading power. But, we can certainly think of one or two people who we could put up in that Sycamore Tree. We may even be able to think of one or two we'd like to hang from that tree.

I hope I've given you enough context here that you're able to understand just how scandalous this story really was. An odious person wants so hard to see Jesus, he climbs up a tree to get a better view. And, Jesus doesn't just notice him. He calls him by name, honors him by going to

his house, and then blesses him. And, he does all this in full view of the good, dutiful, disciples that have been following him all along. And, they grumbled. I imagine grumble is probably too kind a word for what his followers must have said when Jesus honored Zacchaeus.

Jesus, in this one little action, taught so much about God's love and mercy. Our Gospel ends with this important message in one sentence that I would call a summary of the entire New Testament - "The Son of Man came to seek out and save the lost."

By this time in the liturgical cycle we've heard enough of these stories in Luke that it shouldn't come as a shock - Jesus sides with those on the margins, the despised and rejected, those we would consider other. The poor, widows, enemies, strangers, women, Gentiles, Samaritans, Pharisees, Romans, sinners...and tax collectors. And, in seeing, honoring, and blessing all of these *others*, who we would exclude, Jesus shows us what the Kingdom of God really is. Not an exclusive club for those within our circle - those who belong to our social group, our economic class, our religion, our political party. God's Heavenly Kingdom is for everyone - saint, sinner; man, woman; liberal, conservative; bureaucrat, laborer; Christian, Muslim, Jew, Buddhist and atheist. Jesus proclaims we are all children of Abraham, beloved sons and daughters of an extravagantly loving God.

And what did Zacchaeus do to be honored by Jesus? Nothing, other than to want to see him. Was Zacchaeus a repentant tax collector when he climbed in the tree? No, he was just curious. Did he live up to his promise of giving half his possessions to the poor and making amends to those he cheated? Perhaps. But, it doesn't matter. Jesus saw Zacchaeus - beyond his sins, beyond his fears, beyond his stature - he saw Zacchaeus for who he really was, he honored him, and he blessed him. And Zacchaeus's response makes perfect sense to those of us who have felt God's eyes look upon us with love and mercy - Zacchaeus responds with generosity and a desire to clean up his life. I'm reminded of the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous. Amends don't come until Step Nine. For good reason. Those who have been so lost in addiction, so separated from the experience of God's love and mercy, have to experience that love and mercy in the other eight steps before they're truly ready to respond. If making amends for sins and offenses were required as one of

the first steps, no one would ever get clean or sober. If God required us to clean up our lives before he looked lovingly on us, we'd still all be out in the weeds. Addicts, just like all of us, carry the great burden of shame. We think God sees us as we see each other, and as we often see ourselves. But, "The Lord does not see as mortals see; they look on outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart." Those in throws of addiction just like those mired in fear resentment, and selfishness can't imagine a loving God who accepts them as they are. Zacchaues couldn't possibly imagine a God so loving that he would invite himself to his house, the house of a sinner. But, he wanted a look.

And it's the same with us, isn't it? We want a look. We may not imagine God would even consider us, much less want to throw us a party. But we want just a peak.

And, God sees us, honors us, blesses us. God sees beyond our offenses which makes us fall in love with him, and want to live a new life, the life of one beloved of God.

Seen, honored, blessed. It is the Good News in three words.

So, whom would you put up in the tree...someone you resent, someone you despise, someone you fear? Can you see them in that tree? Can you see yourself there, too? ...

Now, do you see Jesus looking up and smiling.