

Not Really a Children's Story

Every time we come across the Zacchaeus story, we're tempted to think of it as a story Jesus told so that second graders would have a little biblical skit to perform during their preparation for their first Eucharist. There are elements in this Lukan story to make "little people" feel good about Jesus' interest in them, but the story really has a much deeper purpose and is anything but a children's story.

The physical stature of Zacchaeus is not his most significant distinguishing characteristic. As a "chief tax collector," Zacchaeus was just not a Jew collecting a tax from his own people to fill the coffers of the occupying Romans, he also profited far more than any of the others of his despised profession. For Jesus to invite himself to the table of such an outcast was a scandal to the crowd. But it is again clear that Jesus' concept of hospitality is not predicated on status or even fidelity to the law. Zacchaeus' curiosity is sufficient.

The storyline also includes an element of urgency. Zacchaeus' pressing curiosity is enough for him to climb a tree. Jesus, on seeing him, expresses a similar urgency, prompting him to interrupt his journey by addressing him,

Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house."

Jesus will not let this opportunity pass by. As did the father in the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus jumps at the chance to extend his welcome to the outcast and the sinner.

This Gospel invites us, as the Gospels often do, to several comparisons. We are Zacchaeus. We are the crowd. We are called to be Jesus.

In so many ways we can see ourselves in Zacchaeus, a complex character fully capable of compromising religious and cultural values for the sake of material profit and comfort. At the same time we, too, feel we are "good people." We strive to be just and charitable in our daily lives, and like Zacchaeus, we are curious about just who this Jesus is. These are clearly tensions in our lives as they were for that tax collector. Perhaps

that's why Jesus used that class of people so often in offering us models of hope and promise.

You and I can also identify with the crowd in this Gospel story. Self-righteous attitudes constantly challenged the response to Jesus then as they do today. Is it that the crowd feels slighted by Jesus' preferential option for the lost and marginalized? Is it that the crowd feels that the good they do should count for something? Why all this attention to the outcast? What was true then is just as true today. We have to admit that we often find ourselves similarly uncomfortable which can easily translate into a complacency to the Gospel mandate of unconditional love for the marginalized in our society.

However, like so many stories in the Gospels, the invitation is ultimately to imitate the hero of the story. Like Jesus, we should experience the urgency of seeking out those who are on the margins, those who are hurting, the lost, lonely, the outcast. Like Jesus, we should not be swayed by self-righteous attitudes, whether they originate in society or even in the church. Like Jesus, we are called to be willing, even proud, to

associate with the outcast, the marginalized, the alienated, whether he or she be an immigrant, a gay person, the poor, even the incarcerated. As Jesus taught Zaccheus, we know that embracing the human condition as he did will bring salvation to this house.

The Book of Wisdom in today's first reading from the Hebrew Testament reveals how all of this is part of the Divine Plan:

*But you have mercy on all, because you can do all things;
and you overlook people's sins that they may repent.
For you love all things that are
and loathe nothing that you have made;
for what you hated, you would not have fashioned.*

The Zacchaeus story is much more than a children's story. It is a story that challenges each of us to reflect on just how we find ourselves in that story. This Eucharist we celebrate leads us from acknowledging our own frailty and failings to embracing the identity of the one who gave his all both for despised tax collectors and the self-righteous crowds.