

**Proper 26 – 23 Pentecost – Year C – November 3, 2010 - Homily**  
**Habakkuk 1:1-4; 2:1-4; Psalm 119: 137-144; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12; Luke 19:1-10**  
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The story of short-statured Zacchaeus is almost guaranteed to raise a smile. It is told, at least initially, in a lighthearted and energetic way, and we might imagine the hearers laughing uproariously about little Zak running on ahead, and climbing a tree so he can see Jesus over the crowd. Obviously, Jesus' reputation precedes Him. The crowd is lining the streets of Jericho, ready to meet and greet Jesus as He travels through their city. It smacks of a political rally. Today, we have all become accustomed to using politically correct terms to avoid offending others, or implying that our differences make us superior or inferior in any way. The PC term for Zacchaeus is, as you all know, "vertically challenged". Other PC terms that we're familiar with in common use are African-American and Native American. Gender-neutral terms like police officer or firefighter. And others like, visually challenged, hearing impaired, and differently-abled. Men no longer have receding hairlines, but advancing foreheads. In academic writing, the common and explicitly Christian terms A.D. and B.C. are now frequently replaced by C.E. and B.C.E, meaning Common Era, Christian era, or current era; and before each of those, respectively. You can decide whether you think being PC has gone too far in terms of being sensitive to everyone!

The one thing that we can never pin on Jesus is being PC about anything. He usually tells it like it is, and yet still maintains the gifts of incredible compassion, mercy and grace. We really should wonder whether Jesus' life is more than just a radical retelling of God's Law, but also offers us major insights into our PC mad Common Era. We live in an age where we dance carefully on tiptoe around everything and everyone for the sake of appearances, and yet so frequently fail to live into the heart of the Gospel message, which is largely about social justice, equality, and peace for all. I think it's fair to say that we would never hear Jesus utter the PC term for Zacchaeus as being socially and vertically challenged, although a clearly upwardly mobile individual. No. Instead, Jesus scandalously refers to our friend Zak as a son of Abraham, pretty much offending everyone who hears. That description is given despite the sure knowledge that by virtue of his job as chief tax collector in collaboration with the occupying Roman force, Zacchaeus is an outcast from his community, dishonored, and despised. Jesus goes even further in offending the sensibilities of the witnesses, by staying at Zak's place, and sharing dinner with him. To share a meal with someone in that era was more than just a friendly gesture, but a significant symbol of acceptance and approval. Does Jesus really approve of Zacchaeus' ruthless pursuit of wealth and injustice as the chief tax collector, or is something else happening here?

On the other hand, by joyfully welcoming Jesus into his home, Zacchaeus is also showing his own approval and acceptance of Jesus. Guess who is going to be changed the most by this encounter?! At the end of the passage, Jesus boldly states that his mission is to seek out and to save the lost. Jesus doesn't wait for the invitation to stay with Zacchaeus – He invites Himself in. In other words, God always is always knocking on the door of our hearts, and it is God who initiates our steps to salvation. Whatever made Zacchaeus climb a tree to see Jesus – simply curiosity, or the stirring of his heart in response to the Lord – it was Jesus who sought him out, and initiated the divine encounter. On our own, apart from God, we are sorely hindered from seeing and experiencing God's grace. Yet when, not if, God seeks us out, our only appropriate response is, like Zacchaeus' one of joyful welcome and gracious hospitality. The experience of accepting Jesus into his home is

completely life-changing for Zacchaeus. He shows Jesus how he has repented of his sinful way of life through his ongoing actions of repentance. He is giving away half of his possessions to the poor, and making a generous fourfold restitution to anyone he has defrauded. In Luke's Gospel, living faith is all about walking the walk, as well as talking the talk. Faith is more than just accepting Jesus as our Lord and Savior. It is allowing the Gospel to change us from the inside out, transforming our way of life into authentic, faithful living, characterized by the acts that display our love of God and our love of our neighbors as ourselves.

After Zacchaeus addresses Jesus, Jesus says, "Today salvation has come to this house." That rather expands our definition of salvation doesn't it? Zacchaeus is not dead or obviously close to death – so Jesus cannot be simply talking about the gift of eternal life in terms of Zak's salvation here. Salvation is much more than a future promise of God's grace; it is a very present reality. By definition, salvation encompasses our current deliverance from evil and the things that lead to death, as well as our healing. As we saw on Sunday, according to the words of the prophet Habakkuk, those who live sin-soaked lives are deathly sick from a spiritual perspective, because of their worldly indulgences. Zacchaeus' joyous welcome of Jesus, his hospitality, repentance, and generosity in the form of retributive justice, are all part of his salvation. These same actions are also part of our salvation today.

What is not so obvious about this whole scenario, is Jesus' indirect critique of those who are grumbling about His behavior and apparent approval of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus models an open heart that is being transformed by God's grace into a generous heart. He is embodying faithfulness in his behaviors. On the other hand, the crowd is very ungracious and ungenerous in their judgment and exclusion of Zacchaeus. The one the crowd has judged as a sinner, Jesus proclaims to be a beloved son of Abraham. The story begs the question of who is really living faithfully. It prompts us all to examine our own hearts for those times when we are unfair and ungracious in *our* judgment of others. Are we really living into our Baptismal covenant by seeking the face of Christ in all those we meet along the way? Or are we blind to the faithfulness of others that is so clearly visible to God, because of some socio-cultural label or stereotype? Our invitation to grow in God this week is to intentionally, and joyfully open our hearts daily to God's grace. Let's see what a difference that simple act of hospitality makes in our own lives, and the lives of our friends and neighbors, as God's grace transforms us.

Now the burning question: is faith in action the same as moving from being somewhat spiritually challenged, to being Christ affirming? Perhaps we should just focus on our relationship with Jesus as faithful disciples, and let our PC-obsessed society decide what to call our faith in action, so that the Good News offends no one!

Amen.