Spirituality
Scripture for Life



"Christ and Zacchaeus" (1913) by Danish artist Niels Larsen Stevns (Wikimedia Commons)



by Sr. Mary M. McGlone

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November 2, 2019

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## Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

November 3, 2019

Wisdom 11:22-12:2

Psalms 145

2 Thessalonians 1:11-2:2

Luke 19:1-10

What was he thinking? A short, petty but powerful man shinnying up a tree to spy as Jesus and friends passed through Jericho. There must have been advance publicity; somebody spread the news that Jesus and his group were going through Jericho on their way to Jerusalem. Luke tells us that Jesus didn't even intend to stop there.

No matter how it started, Zacchaeus got the word that Jesus was coming through and he made ready on his own terms. Zacchaeus planned to see without being seen. Something must have been going on inside of him that was not quite clear — certainly not clear enough to put on public display. But some interior movement was churning inside him and he knew it could change everything.

So, without having any clue of the symbolism of his action, he climbed up a tree to see what Jesus' salvation was all about.

Zacchaeus surely didn't expect Jesus to look up just as he passed under his perch, but that's what happened. Funny how these things evolve: There's a man up a tree, a prophet glances his way, then lo and behold, the shifty onlooker becomes the honorable host whose résumé reveals some surprises.

Why did Luke tell this story toward the end of his Gospel? Among the evangelists, Luke holds the prize for highlighting the poor with their blessedness in God's eyes and for underlining the moral indictment their poverty brings against society. (Among other examples, remember how Luke quoted Jesus as saying, "Blessed are the poor" and "Woe to you rich" — where Matthew blessed the "poor in spirit" — and the parable of Lazarus and the rich man.)

Last week, we heard Jesus tell the story of two men who prayed in the temple area: One reminded God of his impeccable virtue and the other begged for mercy. That parable, like the story of Zacchaeus, is unique to Luke, and both portray Jesus' approval of transformed tax collectors. Jesus explains his verdict saying, "The Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost."

At the end of his Gospel, Luke makes that idea an interpretative key to his story by telling us that Jesus spoke his last words to another person by promising salvation to a fellow victim of crucifixion. According to Luke, Jesus' preferential option for the sinner was just as strong as his option for the poor.

Today's reading from Wisdom offers an alternative rendition of the same theology with one of the loveliest descriptions of God we can find in the Hebrew Scriptures: "You have mercy on all, because you can do all things." That might also be the most countercultural description of power that we will ever find. This indicates that God exercises omnipotence through forgiveness.

What does this have to do with us who don't expect Jesus to be parading down our streets anytime soon? In today's selection from the Second Letter to the Thessalonians, the author writing in Paul's name makes two prayers on behalf of the church: that the community be made worthy of God's calling and that God's will be fulfilled in them. Ultimately, those are one and the same thing, and they describe what happened to Zacchaeus.

When Luke quotes Zacchaeus' conversation with Jesus, the dialogue is all in the present tense. Zacchaeus said, "I give half of my belongings to the poor." His just behavior already expressed his desire to live a better life. That led him to go out on a limb, taking an isolated position similar to that of the publican of Jesus' parable who stood far apart from the others.

Jesus saw Zacchaeus' precarious position and invited him to take the next step. That step entailed no longer trying to do everything on his own terms.

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In receiving Jesus into his home, Zacchaeus accepted God's outreach of love, God's omnipotent forgiveness. Zacchaeus' acceptance of God's love in Christ brought him

salvation and would inspire him to continue in good works.

Today's first reading addresses God as the Lord and lover of humankind (a favorite phrase in the Byzantine eucharistic liturgy). That phrase implies that God's love is the dynamic of the reign of God. Zacchaeus' story, like the rest of the Christian Scriptures, reminds us that God first loves us; God's love is all that we need and that it is the only power that can make us worthy.

When we humbly accept that, we can be called off the limbs we go out on by trying to do it our way, and we can revel in God's love. When we do that, good works will flow ever more naturally and Christ's salvation will be evident in our world.

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***Editor's note:*** *Sign up to receive weekly Scripture for Life emails.*

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