

Until sometime around high school, I was extremely short. As you can imagine, this led to me being the butt of many jokes and getting pushed around a lot. This in turn led to some issues with self-esteem which I compensated for with a chip on my shoulder. Perhaps not surprisingly, it wasn't until I encountered a group of Christian peers that treated me with respect and love that I was finally able to begin to develop a true sense of self-worth and overcome some of the issues that I had been facing in my life.

For this reason, it was always easy for me to identify with the figure of Zacchaeus in today's Gospel. Perhaps I am projecting, but I can easily imagine that the people around Zacchaeus looked down at him because of his height, and I don't only mean physically. This could have contributed to him becoming the chief tax collector, whether it was out of an effort on his part to earn their respect or simply to retaliate against those who had hurt him. No matter the reason, in the end his plan back-fired because it only led to him being looked down on even more because of his perceived sinfulness.

In the midst of this sense of isolation, Zacchaeus hears that Jesus will be passing through town. He has heard many stories about this itinerant preacher, even some rumors that He scandalized the Pharisees by eating with known sinners. Zacchaeus is curious to see what kind of man this is. He wonders if Jesus will actually see him for who he truly is. If Jesus doesn't, however, then He will prove that He is a hypocrite like the rest and justify the chip on Zacchaeus' shoulder.

So, Zacchaeus went to try and see Jesus, but the crowd kept continued to look down on him and push him out of the way. So eventually Zacchaeus ran ahead of them and climbed up a tree so that he could finally look down on those who so often looked down on him. Then we are told that Jesus came along and looked up, seeing Zacchaeus and inviting him to come down for a feast. These simple actions

transformed Zacchaeus' entire life, and he came down filled with great joy, promising to make restitution for every sin he had ever committed.

From the outside, this sudden conversion seems a little fake and contrived. How in the world could Zacchaeus experience such a deep conversion after a glance and simple invitation? This only makes sense in light of the words from today's first reading from the book of Wisdom. There we hear, "For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated, you would not have fashioned. And how could a thing remain, unless you willed it?"

Zacchaeus had grown up ridiculed and hated. Even when Jesus called up to Zacchaeus, the people around grumbled about the attention that Jesus was giving him. In the glance of Jesus, Zacchaeus saw something that he never fully encountered anywhere else. Love. True love. He saw the gaze of the one who created him and loved him despite his faults.

In fact, his faults were only possible because God allowed them to exist. God did not despise Zacchaeus because of his faults, but rather allowed his faults to remain so that Zacchaeus would have a reason to call upon God for help. We hear this clearly in Paul's 2nd letter to the Corinthians. "Three times I begged the Lord that [the thorn in my flesh] might leave me, but he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.'"

In our own lives, how many of us are more like Zacchaeus than we are willing to admit? How many of us have weaknesses or faults that we despise about ourselves? How many of us believe the lies that others tell us about ourselves, believing that we are not good enough or worthy enough because we do not measure up to who they think that we should be? How many of us then begin to look down on others as we try to compensate for the ways that they look down on us?

Conversely, we could ask ourselves how many times we have encountered people like Zacchaeus in our lives without ever truly recognizing them for who they are. How many times have we looked at those around us with scorn, judging them because they do not measure up to our standards, despising them for their weaknesses, without once ever trying to look at them with mercy and love? How many of us fail to recognize their great desire to be loved which they hide from us in their sins?

For those of us who have been like the judgmental crowd around Zacchaeus, today we are invited to become more like Jesus and look upon those around us with love and mercy instead of scorn. We must look upon them with the love of God so that they might come to know their own self-worth. For those of us who are like Zacchaeus, then today we are invited to believe that we have worth if for no other reason than the fact that our God created us and loves us deeply and passionately. It is only when we truly know and believe this about ourselves that we will be able to slowly begin rebuilding our sense of self-worth and overcome the scorn of the world.

If it hadn't been for those friends who showed me the gaze of Christ, I would have probably never climbed down from my tree. I would probably still be up there, staring down with disdain at those who had driven me up there in shame. Thanks be to God, they invited me to come down and join with them at the feast and my life has never been the same. At one time or another in our lives, we will all either be Zacchaeus or the crowd around him. We must allow the loving gaze of Christ to penetrate our hearts so that we can finally come down from our tree with our sense of self-worth restored and then share this gift of Christ's loving gaze with others, inviting everyone we meet to His eternal feast.