

Luke 19: 1-10
Proper 26
October 30, 2016
Youth Sunday

Two of our High School youth preached this Sunday, Parker Davenport, a senior, and Jaden Adhazi, a junior.

Learning from Zacchaeus

Homily by Parker Davenport

There's a reason Zacchaeus is a longtime favorite story to teach to kids. It's pretty easy to understand, for one: a little man climbs up in a tree to see Jesus, and Jesus has dinner at his house. It's got a great message about forgiveness and, if we're honest with ourselves, it's a little bit silly.

But there's a lot more to this story if you're willing to dig into it. Let's look at Zacchaeus himself. Sure, He was a tax collector, but why was a tax collector such a reviled public figure? I mean, nobody is really a fan of taxes today, but IRS agents aren't exactly spit on in the street.

But Zacchaeus wasn't just collecting taxes; he was a collaborator with the Roman Empire that held basically complete power over the Jewish people. He was a very public symbol of the Jews' oppression, and had the audacity to also be a crook. In short, he was despised among his people.

And here Jesus was, inviting him to dinner. (Well, inviting himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' house, but that was kind of what Jesus did) The leaders of the Jews were furious. Now, Jesus had a long and controversial history of dining with prostitutes and sinners of all walks, but this was a whole other level of offensive, because Jesus was the Messiah and the Messiah was, traditionally speaking, expected to lead the Jews out of oppression, and here was Jesus making nice with someone complicit in that oppression. That really got their sacrificial goat.

Now, another crucial moment in the story is the tree-climbing. Zacchaeus was a grown man, after all, and a wealthy one at that. Climbing a tree was beneath him in every sense but the literal. And it was a sycamore tree known for producing fruits that were inferior to the point where the only people who ate them were those that couldn't afford figs.

Symbolically, Zacchaeus is giving up his wealth and status and humbling himself before the Lord, which reflects his later pledge to give back four times what he had taken, literally giving up his wealth to follow Jesus. And Jesus accepted him into the fold. Zacchaeus opened his heart and the Lord not only forgave him, but openly welcomed him.

Which takes us right back to the how the people looked at both Zacchaeus and Jesus. Now, they had a legitimate grievance; the man was a corrupt part of a corrupt power structure, mistreating his own people. But there is another element at play here. God's people were afraid, they were a people under threat. And one of the unfortunate tendencies of a community when threatened is to tighten the borders, so to speak. To turn inwards, to define themselves by who and what they were not.

Today, we face that same obstacle to our mission as followers of Jesus. We can too easily resort to othering groups of people to cement our own identities, whether as Christians or as Americans. We are us because we are not them, after all.

But allowing ourselves to create distance between us and those who don't fit in our imagined Christian Box could prevent us from following the example of Jesus.

We all need to remember that we are called to define ourselves not by who we are not and who we do not accept, but by who we are: children of God, created in God's own image and called to follow in the footsteps of Christ Jesus. We are called to examine our own prejudices, to see where our preconceived notions prevent us from reaching out in the example of our Lord. To examine where we cross the line between rejecting an action and condemning the person performing the action.

We see in this story, Jesus setting the example of welcoming the other by inviting all, even Zacchaeus, to be in. And as Christians, we too are called, with God's help, to follow the example of our Lord -- to welcome, to include, to invite, to forgive. To walk in the path of Jesus.

Homily by Jaden Adhazi

In Luke 19:1, we read the tale of Zacchaeus, a Son of Abraham. Zacchaeus is a tax collector who goes to see Jesus, but cannot due to his height. There's a desire within him to see Jesus, so he climbs a sycamore tree to see him, even if he looks ridiculous doing it. Jesus spots him and asks him if he can stay at his house. The people begin to call out Jesus as the guest of a "sinner". Because, you know, just doing your job as a tax collector to make some cash immediately labels you as a sinner of the highest category. Zacchaeus, however, repents. Repent literally means "to turn around, do a 180." Zacchaeus basically did a 180 on his life, giving half his possessions to the poor and paying four times the amount to those he cheated.

Alright, so I've got a little story to tell you. I knew a guy back in middle school named Grayson, and we weren't on the best of terms. We were constantly insulting each other, but we never traded any physical blows. However, it quickly escalated into a fistfight between us when he made some racially offensive comments. When it ended, I had a split lip and some sore spots, while he had a black eye and a split lip. He got OSS for a day while I was stuck with a day of ISS. After our punishments, we tried our best to stay out of each other's way, but we soon ran into each other one day. He apologized for the comments, and I soon learned that he was going through a rough

patch at home, with his parents fighting nearly all the time. We shared a good laugh over the experience, and we soon became good friends. Turns out we both had a healthy interest in TV shows such as *Modern Family* and *The Middle*.

The story in Luke relates to mine because Jesus, in his infinite glory, forgives a sinner when he shows genuine repentance. Jesus shows us the way. Shows how he forgives us as sinners, and shows us how to forgive others. Zacchaeus knows that Jesus is merciful and compassionate, so he goes to see Jesus to find a new way of life. Jesus also saw him and was open to forgiving him because he knew Zacchaeus was genuine. We must be willing to admit our sins and repent, for only then can we be forgiven. The thing is, it takes courage to admit those mistakes, and it takes even more to be genuine about it. Me, I've made mistakes in life, and I'm not too proud of it, but I leave those mistakes in the past and look towards the future, never looking back and trying to not repeat those same mistakes. Repentance without meaning it, is just you saying a bunch of sweet nothings. Zacchaeus understood this, and made sure he meant every word.

For everyone out there in the crowd, Jesus does ask us to recognize our sin, repent, and seek redemption. While society at different times looks at humanity differently, like the Puritans believing that humankind is naturally evil, while the Transcendentalists believed that humanity is naturally good. We learn from Jesus that God's creation is good, since we are made in the image of God. But we're not perfect. Sin is in the world, and we are drawn to selfishness and pride, to caring more for ourselves than for others. We've all got our flaws, our weaknesses, and we've all made mistakes. We're all, in our own ways, lost. But Jesus is looking for us, paying attention, reaching out to us, even if we're up in a tree. Jesus invites us to follow him to a new way of life, to love God and love our neighbor, to step away from selfishness and assumptions about who other people are.

And we live in hope. Hope shown to us in this story of Zacchaeus.

Jesus forgives Zacchaeus, saying, "Salvation has come to this house...for the Son of Man came to seek and save what was lost." Jesus came to this world for all of us. To forgive us and redeem us. Amen.