

I found myself drawn to the crowd's reaction to Jesus after he invited himself to Zacchaeus's house. They don't like it. Nobody wanted their babies to grow up to be a tax collector.

Zacchaeus became wealthy by collecting taxes for the despised Romans. And he was darned good at it. He's the chief tax collector for the region; he has people working for him, who might be cheating people. So the crowd expected different from Jesus: not someone who calls sinners by name and goes to dine with them.

I can see myself in that crowd. And no offense, but I can see all of us in there. I think our self-righteousness would've come out, our indignation. How could Jesus hang out with someone like this? I would've been critical of Zacchaeus for his work. I would've thought he'd lost his salvation. At a minimum, I would've put conditions on visiting his house: do you promise to change? Will you give up this business and lifestyle?

But Jesus was impressed at the lengths Zacchaeus went to see him, when he climbed up the tree, making a spectacle of himself, and then stands his ground against the crowd. ... They're signs of faith. Jesus is drawn to Zacchaeus's heart. And Christ's liking him had an immediate effect on Zacchaeus: his conversion, his generous promise to help the poor, and to amply compensate anyone if they had been cheated – signs of repentance.

Jesus got through to this tough old bird. He inspired Zacchaeus to change, to be open to salvation. While the crowd had already decided that all wealthy tax collectors were alike, Jesus could see the real Zacchaeus. He loved out the goodness in that man. Everyone else thought Zacchaeus was a terrible person. But Jesus unveiled the truth about the man, who in reality was concerned for the welfare of others. The judgmental world was once again proven wrong.

At the end Jesus says that he "has come to seek and to save what was lost." He's the same God to whom our First Reading gave the title "Ruler and Lover of souls," affirming God's commitment to sustaining life, and to offering sinners every opportunity to make progress in faith, to have a conversion, a change of heart.

Nothing exists unless it's loved by God. The very fact we're alive is proof we're loved by God. God wants us, even after we've made such an awful mess of his Creation. God loathes nothing he has made, and overlooks sins for the sake of repentance; not punishing, but setting into motion some

lessons (maybe hard lessons) to steer people back toward the path of life. God knows our struggles, brokenness and limitations, even better than we do. He knows our weaknesses are never the whole story. He knows what we're capable of and has a plan for our lives – we're created for a purpose.

Jesus came to seek and to save what was lost. This is good news, but only if we're willing to identify ourselves with the lost, to make them our mission. Can we change hearts in our extended family, social circles, workplace or school? Not pegging others, not judging others, not making up our minds about someone?

Assuming they're not mentally ill, we can have a lasting effect on people when we give them another chance. If the people we know can see in us the goodness and greatness of the Lord, if we live in such a way that people want to be like us, they'll want to worship the God we worship. Reach out to the ones who are looking for happiness in all the wrong places, or who have done wrong. Help them find forgiveness, peace and purpose.

Jesus knew the crowd would grumble against him, but he reached out to Zacchaeus anyway. We can't let gossip, criticism and the opinions of what other people might think, stop us from saving the lost. Help bring 'em back to our Father's house.

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time, November 3, 2019, Fr. John Ozella