

On the plane home on Thursday, we met an Irish-American family traveling back to Chicago. I assumed that they were Americans because every member of the family was decked out in Cubs regalia. They were a large group, about seven in all, and the mother was from Chicago while her husband was from Ireland where indeed they were living. Go Cubs Go with an Irish lilt.

As they were seating across the plane in a row just behind us, I could not help hearing some of their names. Kaitlin. Conner. Molly. Eamon. Shannon. They were travelling to visit grandparents in the Chicago area and were amazingly well behaved on the long 7 hour flight over from Dublin.

I mention these Irish names because of they are quite common in Ireland. A common name in Jesus' day in Jewish circles was the name Zaccheus. You don't hear that one very much. Zaccheus means *innocent* or *clean*. Innocent or clean, pure, Zaccheus. What an irony therefore to have this name with its meaning of purity and to be engaged in the defiling and even traitorous practice of collecting taxes -- taxes for Rome, taxes imposed upon the people of Israel by that dominating occupying force of Rome, taxes feeding the Roman bureaucracy, the Roman machinery of empire, the Roman Caesar. Zaccheus.

And so the man with a clean name and a dirty habit of working for the Roman establishment comes to center stage at the beginning of the 19th chapter of the Gospel of Luke. He is short. He probably is deliberately blocked by the crowd from getting close to Jesus because the crowd lining the street in Jericho knows Zaccheus and his ways. Perhaps this is why he cannot gain a better view. And so he climbs a tree.

Nothing is said in this account about how Jesus knows the man's name. Perhaps people were talking about him, complaining about him, putting him down with derision -- look at him. Zaccheus. The name with a name meaning purity; a man with dirty hands. A man who collects taxes for the enemy. A man who overcharges when he levies taxes and makes a lot of money from overcharging. Look at him running ahead. Look at him climbing that tree up there. What does he think he is doing? What does he think is going to happen. Jesus is not going to notice him or even think of him. This Zaccheus. Jesus is just going to pass him by. Jesus is going to have nothing to do with that riff-raff. That traitor of good and decent followers of Temple or Synagogue.

But he stops. He stops at the sycamore tree. The sycamore or mulberry fig in Biblical times was a tree that thrived in the warm lowland areas of the Holy Land. It produced a popular food and its wood was used to make furniture and in the construction of buildings. It was valued especially by the bedouins of the desert who often paused under its low spreading branches. It offered shade from the heat. Being rather low, it was easy to climb. And so we see him scrambling up into the tree under which Jesus would pass, waiting with the hope that he would get a better view.

Why would a man who was profiting from a corrupt practice of levying taxes and living handsomely off of the margins want to climb a tree to get a better view? Is it possible that he has heard so much talk on the streets of Jericho that he cannot resist getting a look?

Sometimes curiosity leads to engagement, to relationship, to discovery. The tax man, the chief tax collector, climbs a tree to get a better view and Jesus stops. Engagement, relationship, discovery. *Zaccheus*, he says to the man in the tree. *Zaccheus, hurry up and come down; for I must stay at your house today. So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.*

In our Old Testament lesson today, we have the prophet Isaiah calling out to the people of his time with great anger and great accusation. He tells the people in no uncertain terms that they are corrupt and that they had better change their ways. At one point he says, *Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good.* It is the social justice message of an inflamed prophet that is summed up in the lines: *seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*

There is often a burning, winnowing anger in the message of prophets and Isaiah's message is not exception to the rule. But notice the interaction of Jesus with this corrupt chief tax collector. The man working for the enemy. He does not call him out. He does not condemn him for his unclean and corrupt ways. He does not pass him by. He does not flay him with words like most prophets. No, instead he simply issues an invitation. Before the disapproving gaping stares of people, he speaks not to them but to the man in the tree. *I must stay at your house today.*

Jericho is an interesting town in the time of Jesus' ministry. Scholars tell us that Jesus was baptized in the Jordan near Jericho. Traveling from Galilee to Jerusalem, Jesus would come down the

Jordan Valley and through the city of Jericho. It was here that he healed the blind man Bartimaeus according to the Gospel of Mark.

Jericho. Scholars surmise that Jesus' activity in the city was probably to the poorer quarter of the city. Zaccheus and the sycamore tree were probably located there. But Jericho also had a rich and opulent section of the city. In that wealthy section, Herod built his magnificent winter capital. This was Herod Antipas, the son of Herod the Great, and now the ruler of Galilee -- a man from a powerful family with Roman connections. A man whose immense wealth was flowing from taxation of the peoples. A man for whom Zaccheus was working.

Herod's palace was 164 by 230 feet. His swimming pool was 65 by 115 feet -- all documented by archeological research. There was a magnificent sunken garden. A paved reception hall. A luxurious Roman-style bath. A separate building for audiences with Herod the ruler over the territory in which both Jesus and John the Baptist would conduct their ministries. Zaccheus was working for a brutal and corrupt man. Here was Herod living in opulence right in Jericho and here was Jesus stopping under a tree and urging one of his agents when it came to Roman taxes--urging this chief tax collector to come down; telling him in front of everybody on the street that Jesus was going to eat with him, spent the time with him, come to *his* house. Imagine the consternation. Imagine the scandal.

Our collect for this Sunday includes this phrase: *Grant that we may run without stumbling to obtain your heavenly promises.* But what if we stumble? What if we wander away? What if we discount the very life-giving presence of the Spirit? Well...

Notice the acceptance of Jesus. Notice the sense not of guilt or of wrong doing here but instead the sense of liberation. How often our faith is framed in terms of guilt. What if we look instead for a sense of liberation. Jesus only invites this man to welcome him in his house. We hear no judgement but rather an inclusive and welcoming love. And the result is amazing. Welcomed and affirmed, Zaccheus responds like a good Jew and not a corrupt agent. In a way, he lives up to his name. Innocent or clean. He voluntarily looks at his own life and says *Look half my possessions Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything I will pay back four times as much.*

In terms of Jewish law, Zaccheus' promise to pay back four times fulfills the strictest requirement of Jewish law for restitution. There is a kind of liberation that is part of a relationship with God as we understand God and come to God in the person of Christ. Paul writes in Romans *For the law*

of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and death. Zaccheus finds acceptance and affirmation and he is set free. His response is joyous.

We are coming to a time of thinking of our own stewardship here at Trinity and as we close this morning I invite all of us to think of stewardship in this context of liberation. Stewardship and Zaccheus may seem to be a pretty far stretch, but consider this association: A man with a name linked with purity but with a known habit of dealing in corruption is welcomed by Jesus. He is set free. And in response, he freely gives of his own substance, beyond any restitution requirement -- he freely gives half of what he has to the poor. This is what Isaiah was preaching about when he speaks of rescuing the oppressed and defending the orphan. Here a man --set free who freely gives. Soon we will be asked to think of how we use our money and how we worship God. But before we do, let us approach God, run towards him like this little man from the pages of scripture, come before him in anticipation of acceptance, welcome, affirmation and liberation.

In the presence of the Spirit of life, God is looking, searching, yearning to set us free.