

Rev. Kevin V. Madigan
Church of Our Lady of Good Counsel, NYC November 3, 2019
31st Sunday of Year C Luke 19:1-10

“Guess who's coming to dinner?” These could have been the words of Katharine Hepburn to Spencer Tracy in the classic movie of the same name, announcing to her husband that Sidney Poitier would be their guest that evening. They could also have been the words of Zaccheus to his wife, informing her that the distinguished rabbi and wonder-worker, Jesus of Nazareth, would be stopping by for something to eat. In both households, the announcement would seem to fall on unbelieving ears. For just as the racist character portrayed by Spencer Tracy would have a hard time believing his wife would invite a black man into their home, so, too, Zaccheus' wife must have found it hard to imagine that a religious figure such as Jesus would eat in the home of someone like her husband, who was considered by the rest of their Jewish neighbors as unworthy of either acceptance or respect, and certainly not friendship.

The tax collector was considered by the local community as a pariah, as an outcast. Not simply because people never like to pay taxes, but because the money collected was extorted from them by the despised Roman Empire, occupying their land with its army. A tax collector, employed by the Romans, was, therefore, considered to be a traitor, a collaborator, a sell-out. In addition, tax collectors usually retained a sizeable portion of what they collected for themselves.

The sense of isolation of Matthew from the local community becomes clear as the story unfolds. Evidentially, a large number of people had crowded the streets, trying to catch sight of Jesus, hoping that He might work in their city some of the same miracles He reportedly had performed in other towns. But Zaccheus, being short in stature, is unable to get close enough to see what's going on. Obviously, if he were someone who had some status in the community, people might have cleared the way for him, that he might get a better view. But Zaccheus, because of his trade, is denied access to Jesus. A veritable human wall of pious, religiously observant Jews blocks him from even catching sight of Jesus. Zaccheus' only chance of seeing Jesus is to climb a tree, from which vantage point he can observe what's going on above the heads of the crowd. We might say that Zaccheus “goes out on a limb” to be able to see Jesus. Then, Jesus surprises everybody, probably Zaccheus most of all, by inviting Himself to this tax-collector's home for dinner that evening. The reason why this gesture was such a shock to those pious Jews, was that any self-respecting rabbi should know better than to associate with the likes of Zaccheus. Even the way that Jesus addresses this religious outcast shows what message He is trying to communicate to the crowd. The crowd refers to Zaccheus with the label “tax-collector,” while Jesus calls Zaccheus

by his name. For the crowd, Zaccheus is reduced to the unsavory function he exercises in their society, while Jesus looks upon Zaccheus as a person, as a human being. Perhaps Jesus even sees in Zaccheus more than he sees in himself, for Jesus sees the possibility of what Zaccheus might become.

In any case, we see here in a very dramatic way how Jesus goes beyond the boundaries of what people expect from a respectable rabbi, as He shows them the lengths to which He will go to bring back those who appear to have been rejected by God, and therefore have been rejected by their community. The fact that Jesus chooses to eat with Zaccheus sends a clear signal to the onlookers, a message many of them found troubling. Because when Jesus decided to eat with Zaccheus in his home, Jesus was showing Zaccheus the respect that his pious neighbors refused to show him. For Jesus, it was always the individual who came first, whatever be their ascribed status in other's eyes.

This is how Jesus conducts His ministry of reconciliation—He restores the sinner to the community. He brings things back to the way they were, before the alleged offense was committed. He makes things right again. Interestingly nowhere in the Gospels does Jesus ever say "I forgive you." Even on the cross Jesus prays, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do." On other occasions He may say, "Your sins are forgiven," but never, "I forgive you." Why? Because to say "I forgive you" would imply a sense of superiority over the one forgiven, that I am in a position to forgive you, that you need forgiveness and I don't, that I am right and you are wrong. It might even possess that similar tone of condescension as when a person, full of their own piety, says to someone with whom they are having a disagreement, "I will pray for you," implying that that person needs prayers and they don't.

Simply put, in matters of forgiveness, actions are more important than words. It involves doing something that shows the past is in the past, and now together we are moving on to the future. Things are back on track to the way they were, before there was a break in the relationship. It may be an invitation on the part of the one "forgiving" to resume some activity that had ceased because of the behavior of the one "forgiven." It is trying to make things right again. It may be a parent asking a child who has really messed up simply to perform some chore around the house that he or she used to take pride in doing. Forgiveness is some gesture that shows confidence in and respect for the one forgiven, without any words need spoken. Jesus invites Himself to Zaccheus' home, and in the very act of doing so tells Zaccheus that he is right in God's sight. This is the model of forgiveness, of reconciliation, that we are invited to make our own.

What Jesus asked of Zaccheus is what Jesus asks of each of us. And that is simply that we help someone take the next best step in their life, then we wait a bit until they take the next best step, then wait a bit longer and take another step. It doesn't matter so much where any one of us is starting from, as where we are headed. Each of us is at a different place in that journey of faith. What we are called to do is to be supportive of each other in that common journey, and never to be like the crowd in today's Gospel who by their judging create a wall, preventing any who is looking for Jesus from having access to Him.

In a few moments we will share the Eucharist, the reenactment of that meal Jesus shared with those about to betray or abandon Him on the night before He was crucified. That meal was part of that whole table ministry of Jesus eating with those considered unworthy of His friendship and respect, people like Zaccheus in today's Gospel. Hence, our Eucharist is not some kind of gold-star signifying how good we have been the past week. An old Latin hymn refers to the Eucharist as "esca viatorum," the food of way-farers. It is the food for people on a journey. That includes all of us. Let us approach the altar, then, not in any self-congratulatory manner, but rather aware of our own weakness, of our own sinfulness, and asking the risen Jesus to help us take that next best step in our lives, as we journey towards God.