



My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I was reading a commentary about today's Gospel. The author warned against sentimentalizing Zacchaeus, the diminutive tax collector. We can often imagine him as being short, cute and appealing. But this commentator says:

"He was a wealthy tax collector, a social oppressor, and a collaborator with an oppressive and dictatorial foreign government. How do we feel about drug dealers riding by in luxury SUVs and pulling out rolls of fifty-dollar bills? How do we feel about former Enron executives now comfortably retired in Aspen? How do we feel about shady political campaign operatives taking millions in donations from foreign governments while manipulating a domestic election?"

"The emotions would be similar for the Jews with respect to Zacchaeus." (*The Word of the Lord: Reflections on the Sunday Mass Readings for Year C* by John Bergsma, pp 422-423, Nook edition)

As I alluded to in my homily last weekend, we can miss the power of the story because we have been far removed from the context. If we have a better sense of Zacchaeus and his sin, we get a better sense of the incredible mercy and love of God. It then gives this story more power – Jesus wants to "eat" with *me*, even despite my incredible sinfulness!

Do we understand the mercy of God? We talk about it a lot, but I think we see it more as God "excusing" us. It's as if He just ignores our sin or "poo-poops" it. But the sins we can't excuse: we can't see God excusing either, and so we might spiral into discouragement and depression. The truth, though, is that **God never excuses our sins**: He **forgives** them. He knows (better than we) the deep betrayal and rejection of His love that each of our sins does to Him; and He forgives them – He is merciful!

Notice the reaction of Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus knows his sin, he knows how he has rejected God and country. When Jesus invites Himself over to Zacchaeus' house – when He accepts him, when He reaches out to him – Zacchaeus is completely changed. He's experienced mercy. He's experienced love in the midst of his betrayal. This mercy and love inspires in him a heroic repentance – he will now give away half of his wealth to those in need, and repay all his extortion not two times over (as the law would have it) but four times over.

It makes me think – if we have not experienced the self-denying repentance of Zacchaeus, is it because we have not experienced the mercy and love of God? The only reason this could be (that I can think of) is that instead of being open and honest with God about the real treachery of our sin, we candy-coat it, ignore it, hide it or excuse it. When we dare to come face to face with the putrid and horrendous reality of our sin, when we surrender it into God's hands, when we plead for mercy – like the tax collector of last week's Gospel – we will experience such love, such mercy that it will change our lives!

I pray for the grace and strength to be honest with God about our sins, and allow His mercy to pour out upon us. I pray that this will lead to such repentance as to desire never to harm our relationship with God again!