

Homily
October 30, 2022
31st Sunday in Ordinary Time
22:37-33:30

For what God hated he would not have created. So we have heard in the First Reading from that wonderful Book of Wisdom. This book, as I have said before, was written about 50 years before the birth of Jesus, probably in the city of Alexandria. And in this Chapter 11, moving into Chapter 12, we hear of God not only as the Creator, but God as the merciful and God who would gradually rebuke and teach one beyond one's sin - and keep doing it, for God's not going to give up on the sinner.

It's a wonderful passage.

Have you ever seen a "banty" rooster? You know what a banty rooster is? A banty rooster is one of the smaller breeds of chicken. They're red and the rooster is nasty. He is the Napoleon of the barnyard. He is going to have his way and if you approach his hens, he will attack you – fiercely and loudly. He's mean.

I've always wondered what makes them so mean. Maybe it's because they're small. I don't know. I'm not a chicken breeder.

I do know this: Zacchaeus in the Gospel was small. He was as it said, "short in stature." Now, how many of you here are short? Julie. (Ritzi) Stand up Julie. (Julie stands next to Father...) Julie is short. Thank you, Julie.

There are times when short people get picked-on, especially on the playground or wherever. They're the butt of jokes and introductions. A number of short people then, become sort of "banty rooster." They go after the person in ways that are really scary.

Zacchaeus was short. I've always wondered what his "back story" was. You know? Back story is what actors create in their head to know more about their character that's not in the script. Zacchaeus probably had a back story where he was picked-on a lot. And he took whatever it was that welled-up in him because of that and put it to use. He became and sought, from that condition that he lived in, to become a tax collector, an extortionist, a wealthy man and a collaborator with the Romans.

Now, if he wasn't picked-on before, now he is hated, despised, marginalized in the community. I don't know why Zacchaeus did this. It doesn't say in the Gospel. But he becomes what he is.

And along comes Jesus into town. Jesus, who was just going to pass through on his way to Jerusalem, that focal point of Luke's Gospel for Jesus, where once he sets his face, he's going. But somehow he is moved by Zacchaeus to pause his journey.

Now Zacchaeus really wanted to see this Jesus, as it says. But he could not see through the crowd. Since he was despised and marginalized, the big people in front would never let him in front of them. That was never going to happen. They weren't even going to let him touch them.

Since he's a rather intelligent fellow, he decides to climb a tree -- which further marginalizes him, right? Now he's not even in the crowd. He's up high. And Jesus notices him. (I've always wondered why Jesus looked up to see him. But that's another back story I don't have.)

Jesus addresses this little guy. "Zacchaeus!" (How he knew his name, I don't know.) "Zacchaeus, come down! I mean to spend the day at your house -- your home." Zacchaeus, overjoyed, hurries down and then he is once again reminded that he is an outcast -- marginalized, hated, despised -- because the people grumble. They argue with Jesus: he's going to the house of a sinner. But we all know it's really aimed at the little guy.

And then something marvelous happens. There is a *metanoia*. It's a Greek word for conversion, *change* in Zacchaeus. He now lets go of half of his wealth. And he's going to pay back anyone he extorted from (defrauded), four times the amount. That goes beyond Jewish law. Then Jesus says, "This man is truly a descendant of Abraham." Abraham, the ever-faithful. Abraham the father of the nations. But especially of the Jewish nation, the people of the Covenant.

The story ends there. We don't know what happens with Zacchaeus. Did he stop being a tax-collector? Did he stop collaborating? We don't know. But we do know because Jesus stopped his journey, took his time to speak with this man and to even dine with him, which is a most intimate thing to do in the ancient Middle East, **he changes**. Zacchaeus changes because Jesus looked at him, saw him and was willing to be with him.

I'll go back to the reading from Wisdom. Jesus does what the Lord God has spoken of in the Wisdom reading. He sees one of God's creatures. He loves that creature. And he urges him, just by being willing to sit with him, to change.

My brothers and sisters, I don't know of a Zacchaeus in the room here. And I'm not going to go looking for Zacchaeus among us. I do know this: We are created in God's image. We are urged to live out the life we have in Jesus Christ and to follow his lead, his way of life.

Who in our life is a Zacchaeus figure?

And would we sit with them?

Would we dine with them?

Would we acknowledge them as beloved of God?

Or, would we grumble about them and wish they would go away?

Perhaps the lesson for us is to go back and reread the reading from Wisdom and ponder it in our own lives, how we have received what God has given us and how we are to give it in return.