

We bow our hearts in prayer: Heavenly Father, You have graciously called us into Your family through Baptism. We humbly pray that You would continue to send us Your Holy Spirit so that we not only remain in Your family through faith, but also that we reflect the light of Christ in our words and actions. Amen.

Dear Fellow Children of God, called and sought and found by our Brother, Jesus Christ,
Grace, mercy, and peace are yours.

Today's theme focuses our attention on God's gift of Marriage & Family.

In the appointed Gospel text, we heard of Jesus attending a wedding feast with a few of His disciples. There He blessed the young couple, not only with His presence but also with a refreshment of wine. Christian weddings are usually an occasion for rejoicing, anticipating a life of love and unity. They are the beginning of a new family, first as husband and wife, and then, if the Lord so blesses, with children to follow.

The days of a child's youth, while certainly difficult in various aspects, are also looked upon by parents and others with anticipation for what this child will grow into. How many Christian parents anticipate that their child will become a crook, or will rebel against their Baptism and fall away from the Church?

Our text for meditation this morning is an alternate Gospel lesson appointed for this day.

But it does not immediately identify itself as following the theme of Marriage & Family.

It's the story of Zacchaeus, *the wee little man who climbed up in a sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see.*

Zacchaeus was that rebel Jewish child, who became a very public crook, the chief tax collector at the very busy customs office in Jericho, the "East Gate" into Jerusalem. And, for the love of money, had rebelled against his Circumcision & fallen away from the Church.

Our text for meditation today is...

We read as follows in Jesus' name:

[Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see Him, for He was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, He looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." So he hurried and came down and received Him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." And Jesus said to him, "**Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham.** For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost." (ESV)

These are Your Words, heavenly Father; sanctify us in the truth, Your Word is Truth. Amen (John 17:17)

He was one of the "black sheep" of the Jewish family, the unworthy, unwelcome sinner.

The cousin, or nephew, or brother you don't speak about, except in low tones because of the pain and shame his rebellion has brought upon the family.

It would be quite neat and tidy of us to think that Zacchaeus was a just nice guy in an unwanted job... that the Jews were unfairly judging him and ostracizing him. But rarely are families so neat and tidy, and this family is no exception.

If his name is any indication, it would seem that he grew up in a conscientious Jewish home.

His name means "clean" or "innocent," a wonderful name for a Jewish man, pointing to the Lord's work of cleansing the sinner, first through sacrifice, but ultimately in Christ. But Zacchaeus was not innocent or free from blame.

At the end of the account, we hear Zacchaeus mention the possibility of having defrauded people, and not just other people, but members of his own family, the Jewish people.

He was seen as a scoundrel, using his power and position to enrich himself off the backs of others.

He was viewed as a traitor, who sold his soul to the hated occupier, the Roman gov't.

He was not only a black sheep, but also a **"lost sheep of the house of Israel."**^{Matthew 15:24}

Though he lived in a city with a large population of priests and Levites, yet he remained unrepentant and continued in his obstinate way.

It might have been too that their unloving judgment of him and his chosen occupation spurred him on.

Their judgment based upon reality, yes, but lovelessly carried out, distancing themselves from him, not with sadness and concern, but with pride and arrogance, he being the sinner.

Their disdain and castigation might even have emboldened him to live up to the "sinner" reputation since he wouldn't find any sympathy or love from them.

Of course, such a situation would also help him justify himself since they had turned against him.

But this doesn't just happen in Zacchaeus' family, does it?

Familiarity, which so often is a blessing, can, by our sinful nature and the prodding of the devil, also be used as a weapon, such as when we withhold our love from others in order to hurt them, hoping that if we can make them feel bad, then they will change their ways.

Guilt can motivate for a while, but eventually it loses its potency, and fights against its goal.

But often, we fall into the same temptations as the Jews did with tax collectors,

we become cold and callous, even indifferent to those who mean the most to us.

We separate ourselves from them for various reasons, but soon arrogance can grow and manifest.

Your pride can make you feel superior to them, and so make it easier to justify your inactivity to be with and to help them.

Perhaps we judge our family member as an impossible case or a lost cause.

We no longer want anything to do with them.

But such lovelessness blinds you to their needs, as well as God's desire: ALL men be saved,^{1Timothy 2:4}

That He come into everyone's house.

Sometimes we separate ourselves out of self-righteousness, in order to keep your own record clean, so that nobody might charge you with fraternizing with such a person,

as if we were following the words of Jesus in Matthew 18[:17], where He says:

And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

But the same Man who commanded us to love our enemies,

would also have us treat "Gentiles" and "tax collectors" with love and respect, so that they might see Christ's love shining on them as well.

Zacchaeus' time of grace had come; he was ready to hear the Gospel,

after all, what causes a grown professional man to climb a tree just to get a glimpse...

Maybe it was that after years of such lavish living, his conscience was starting to get to him.

Perhaps the promise of all the happiness that wealth can buy was starting to sound hollow.

Maybe it was that he was desiring the redemption of God, but didn't know how to acquire it.

Could it be that those responsible for preaching to and administering the sacrifices for him

were themselves defrauding the populace by holding back the forgiveness God guaranteed; that they judged Zacchaeus as an impossible case, a lost cause.

But what does it take to restore a lost cause? How was it that Zacchaeus turned full circle?

It was Christ inviting Himself into his life, staying with him, abiding with him.

Not the pretend religion of good works for guilt-free living, but Jesus, the forgiving Savior.

The one who stops by and knows his name and cares for him.

Who knows the impossibility with man, but the possibility with God.^{Luke 18:28}

In the chapter previous to our text, St. Luke recorded Jesus' conversation with the young ruler, who was also very wealthy.

Of the two men, the young synagogue ruler would've seemed more likely to have followed Jesus, but he walked away from Jesus, too in love with money to love God.
Yet, Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus into his home.

The Savior came to seek Zacchaeus out. Even as He was making His way to Jerusalem where He would suffer and die, not too preoccupied to call on sinners He came to die for. He knows who are His own and they listen to Him, but they aren't always the ones we'd expect. They may have a dark past or even now be enslaved to such manifest sins that you are tempted to think that there is no hope...But like Zacchaeus, they are not a lost cause... Perhaps you have a dark past yourself, or a sin that you're currently hiding or trying to justify, like the loveless judgments or proud self-righteousness. But like Zacchaeus, you are not a lost cause, for Jesus came to seek and save the lost. And look, He has found you and invites Himself in. So then you are not lost, but found.

In Baptism, God has not only found you, but claimed you as His own child. He knows you by name, and gives you His name, so that you are not your own, but His. In Baptism, you have become Zacchaeus, that is clean and innocent of sin. Jesus' trip to the cross outside of Jerusalem is the only wealth you need, since His precious blood, more precious than silver and gold which perish, was poured out as the price for your pride, self-righteousness, and lovelessness. It is the price for your manifest sins, as well as for your hidden ones. He comes to you now and has invited Himself to abide in and with you.

And what a response Zacchaeus gave. He who was forgiven much, loved much. ^{Luke 7:47}
Jesus does not ask how he would amend his life. But he who had a clean heart created in him freely restored 4-fold what he had stolen; and he who had a right spirit renewed in him recognized his wealth was nothing compared to his clean conscience and, according to the grace given him, freely shared with those in need.

It is as if he had heard our Epistle lesson today from Romans 12[:6,8-10,13]

Having gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, let us use them:

... the one who contributes, in generosity... the one who does acts of mercy, with cheerfulness.

Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good.

Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor....

Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

It was not Zacchaeus' response that caused God to forgive him.

It was God's grace upon a sinner for whom Christ died and more, was raised to life.

He too was a Son of Abraham, not just biologically, but a true son through faith in the Jesus.

Salvation, Jesus said, **came to his house**. Zacchaeus' family was declared clean, innocent, not because it bore his name, but because it bore Jesus' name.

We pray:

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me.

Cast me not away from Your presence, and take not Your Holy Spirit from me.

Restore unto me the joy of Your salvation, and uphold me with Your free Spirit. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria