

**Thirty-First Sunday in Ordinary Time
October 31, 2010
8 AM and 4 PM Liturgies**

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Sometimes the gospel message is complicated; sometimes it is remarkably clear and simple. Let's see about today.

Finally, a gospel for the vertically challenged! Poor Zacchaeus! He was a chief tax collector (in other words, a big-man-on-campus), prominent, important, and rich! But he was also short: very short apparently. In a time 2000 years ago when everyone was much shorter than today, Zacchaeus must have stood out quite conspicuously to have Luke take notice and tell this story about him. (We could now all sing a chorus of "Short People.")

But it is not just his stature that gets him dinner that night. He is also wealthy, an agent of the Roman occupying force, a tax collector no less, one of the most despised and vilified types in first-century Palestine. He is, in so many ways, an unsavory character who was probably an embarrassment to just about everyone around him—and short too! Did I mention that?

But Jesus includes him in his following. In fact, he insists on going into his home for dinner. The story Luke tells is really about inclusion and exclusion. Who is a member of Jesus' "in-group," and who is not? And as usual, Jesus turns expectations on their head.

I say “as usual” because this story, unique to Luke’s gospel, is one of many parables and scenes just like it. They are in all the gospels (the “Good Samaritan,” the tax collector from last week’s gospel, the Prodigal Son story, and many, many more) and, together, they tell the story of who Jesus really is. It is a story his contemporaries found very hard to take. It is a story people still find very hard to take. If they really pay attention. So many of us edit the message. Jesus likes strange—and even short—people. Go figure!

There is a whole assortment of other outcasts in the gospels, people who just don’t belong: other tax collectors, public sinners, prostitutes, drunks and gluttons. Zacchaeus has a host of companions; they are all just as unacceptable! They are all outsiders. And most of these types still are—even to us! There are always people around who just embarrass us. They don’t belong to our group—whichever group we belong to these days. Inclusion and exclusion: that’s the point of today’s quaint story. Who does God invite to the banquet? Whom do we exclude from it? That’s the question.

Sebastian Moore once said (despite what many of us may think): “The world does not like what Jesus shows us God is like.” And the world probably never will like it. You and I may think otherwise, but maybe it’s because we’re good at editing who Jesus says *his* God really is.

It's not just "the world" that gets embarrassed and wants to re-shape God into something more acceptable. It is, unfortunately, us—you and I—and even our church. We continue to *exclude* all kinds of people—often in the name of God. You know who they are for you: they're black or white; they're poor or too wealthy; they're gay or straight; they're sinners; they don't obey even the broadest commandments; they're ugly or just short; they're just not like me!

A contemporary theologian, James Alison, says it much more pointedly: "The beginning of Christian moral life is a stumbling into an awareness of our own complicity in hypocrisy, and a becoming aware of quite how violent that hypocrisy is." Or, as he says in another place: "Sin is resistance, in the name of God, to the creative work of God which seeks to *include* us all."

Yet exclusion is more common. Think of all the recent attention finally being paid to the amount of bullying going on in our country. Think of all the middle-school and high school kids trying so desperately to "fit in" to an expected image. They have to get themselves on the "inside," become accepted, included—at almost any cost. And then think sadly of all those young people who choose to commit suicide rather than continue as outsiders—not just lesbian, gay and trans-gendered kids, but perhaps recently, especially them.

To exclude anyone is to do them violence and to deeply offend the creative, all-inclusive God who invites all of us out of the trees and into the banquet table. As the Book of Wisdom says today speaking of God: “...You love all things that are and loathe nothing you have made; for what you hated you would not have fashioned.”

Today’s gospel is not really about the vertically challenged, after all. It is about Jesus trying, yet again, to tell us who *his* God really is. All must be welcomed or none will enjoy fully.

“Zacchaeus, too, is a child of Abraham, and today salvation has come to his house.” Only with the same spirit of inclusion and welcome, can salvation can come to our house too. “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.” So keep your eyes peeled in the Sycamore trees all around us. There may be someone waiting to be invited down.

Sometimes it’s complicated; sometimes it’s embarrassingly simple.