

A sermon preached on November 3rd, 2019 – All Saints Sunday – based upon Luke 19:1-10 entitled, “The Story of Zacchaeus and What It Might Tell Us about Recognizing the Saints Among Us.”

Before I talk about our Gospel story, I want to talk a little about the trip our family just returned from visiting our son Bobby who is living in Belfast, Northern Ireland. We had a lot of really special time with our family all together – a rarity – and saw some of the incredible beauty of the land.

What I also appreciated was the opportunity to learn some of the history I wasn't well acquainted with regarding the conflict that have plagued the land between Protestants and Catholics for centuries. The worst of the conflict took place during what is known as “The Troubles” lasting from the late sixties until 1998 with the signing of the Good Friday peace accord. During this timespan violence took the lives of over 3500 people, a figure which given the relative size of the country would be comparable to 650,000 Americans dying in our country. Everybody knew somebody who died, but generally speaking it was always someone from their own “tribe.”

The conflict has had little to do with religion; it is all about cultural identity. There's a joke we heard of a man who moved back to Northern Ireland. He found himself in a strange neighborhood with a group of young thugs suddenly surrounding him. “Are you a Catholic or a Protestant?!” they demanded to know. Not wanting to be a part of the conflict, with some quick thinking he answered, “I'm Jewish!” The thugs were momentarily taken aback by the answer, but then asked, “Well, are you a Catholic Jew or an Protestant Jew?!”

Thankfully the violence has for the most part stopped, but there are constant reminders of the Troubles: you drive around the city of Belfast and different neighborhoods are clearly identified with graphic murals glorifying those who did the fighting for their side during the troubles, with images of para-military soldiers dressed in black holding rifles.

In spite of the constant reminders of the old animosity, much progress has been made. Sports provide a way for some to move past the conflicts of the past. Although Bobby's team is located in a traditionally Protestant town, there are Catholic players on his team. We met the father of one, a warm and charming fellow who spent seven years in prison for being a member of the Irish Republic Army.

Nonetheless, it will surely take a long time before the capacity to see beyond the stereotypes of cultural identifies fully prevails. We're not so different here in the United State. We are a divided country, and we often have a hard time seeing the individuals beyond the such labels as conservative or liberal.

I'll return to this, as they say in Ireland in a wee little bit.

I always liked this passage about Zacchaeus the “wee little man” as the old Sunday School song refers to him as.

There are certain things that are pretty clear in this story. Jesus has been making his way to Jerusalem where he will lay down his life for all people, and towards the end of his journey he passes through the town of Jericho. Out of a great crowd of people who gather to see him Jesus singles out Zacchaeus, a despised and rejected rich taxcollector to invite himself to his house of all people for lunch, surprising and upsetting the crowd of people, something he had done a number of times before by his willingness to associate in close contact with people others thought of as "sinners."

That much is clear, but there are aspects of the story that are open to interpretation.

My usual way of understanding this passage is this: Zacchaeus is a pretty despicable guy. As a taxcollector – and the chief taxcollector at that – in the eyes of the people of his town he is a traitor to his people – someone who has taken a lucrative position working for the Roman oppressors, collecting the taxes the emperor requires from the people. Over time Zacchaeus has become rich and elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke Jesus has often warned of the spiritual danger of the temptations of wealth. Apparently Zacchaeus has succumbed to these temptations, coming to love money more than people, taking advantage of the opportunities afforded by his position to cheat the people of what little money they have in order to get himself even more money.

So in this interpretation there is good reason to despise Zacchaeus, but nonetheless I like to speculate about how he ended up in this place of extreme isolation. Maybe he was picked on for being short. Maybe he had sensible reasons for taking the job – somebody had to take the position or the Romans would have unleashed their wrath – so it might as well be him. He was always good with numbers. But in that position the people turned on him, hardening their hearts towards him and as is the way in this world he hardened his heart in return and came to feel justified in cheating them of their money.

I like to imagine Zacchaeus feeling stuck in his loneliness and isolation. He can't change the path he has taken, and he's powerless to soften his hardened heart in the face of the venom directed towards him.

He hears that Jesus is passing through town on his way to Jerusalem, and he wants to see him. Perhaps it's simple curiosity because of Jesus' fame, his reputations for miraculous healing and especially the buzz about how he might be the messiah who is headed to Jerusalem to drive out the Romans. Maybe it's just curiosity, or maybe his desire to see Jesus suggests some spiritual longing on his part, but he is short and the crowds gathered certainly aren't going to make room for him to see so he cleverly runs up ahead and climbs a tree under which he knows Jesus will pass.

It is there that Jesus stuns Zacchaeus with divine grace, inviting himself over to his house of all houses to have lunch. As a result of this outpouring of love — this blast of divine grace — the change of heart that wasn't possible for Zacchaeus on his own suddenly becomes possible, moving him from an attitude of entrenched self-centeredness to a posture of service to others. He announces to the stunned crowd that from henceforth he will give

away half of his income, and if he has defrauded anyone, he will repay them four times over. Jesus declares Zacchaeus to be a child of Abraham and in doing so commands the community to welcome him back into their good graces.

This is my usual interpretation, and I like it a lot and probably won't let it go.

But this week I read a commentary that suggested that maybe I've been getting this story quite wrong. There is a different way of hearing the story based upon how certain verbs in verse 8 are translated. Some translations put the verbs in the present tense, and others in the future tense, and apparently there is good reason to argue that the more accurate translation is the present tense. So when Zacchaeus talks about giving away half of his possessions to the poor, and paying back four times over those he has defrauded, he's not talking about something he will *begin* doing from this point forward; he's talking about what he's *already* been doing all along but which the people of his town were incapable of seeing because they'd already drawn conclusions regarding the sinister sort of person Zacchaeus was because of his occupation.

So in this interpretation, the story isn't really about the transformation of Zacchaeus brought about by divine grace; rather it has to do with Jesus seeing the goodness that exists in a person that the rest of the community had long ago become blind to seeing.

It links back to the problem in Northern Ireland of not seeing people clearly as a result of the categories in which they are placed, a problem with which we all struggle.

So this is all Saints Sunday. In the Roman Catholic tradition, saints are very special people who have reached a level of holiness well beyond the rest of us mortals. There is a value to this because there are extraordinary souls whose example the rest of us would do well to try and follow. The traditional Protestant understanding though is derived from the way "saints" are understood in the Bible: a saint is any person within the community of faith that finds its lodestar in Jesus.

Mother Theresa who was made a "saint" by the Catholic Church following her death expressed this truth in a story I heard. She landed in an airport and an obnoxious reporter was badgering her with the question, "Are you a saint?" Finally she answered, "Yes. And so are you." Saints are human beings, which means they are very fallible, possessing both light and shadow, with a profound capacity for goodness but also a capacity for evil, for pettiness and cruelty.

So in this interpretation Jesus sees what the community is unwilling to see in Zacchaeus, the goodness hidden inside his occupation as a taxcollector. This isn't to say there wasn't bad stuff in Zacchaeus as well, but that's how it is with all of us. As followers of Jesus we are called to see the goodness that others might miss, to name it and nurture it. God intends to transform us by the time we reach heaven, because in heaven there is nothing but love.

We are also called to recognize the struggles others are dealing with out of our sight. On the streets of Belfast, among all the murals that glorified violence and held on to the ancient

resentments of the past, I came across a mural with one of my favorite quotes: *"Be kind to everyone you meet, because everybody is fighting a great battle of which you know nothing."* It is within these battles hidden from sight that holiness ultimately is forged.