

*Children's time: "Trinity" - water, ice, steam/fog - all H2O as we experience it variously-*  
“Suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because of God...” There are times when I've met a person who is peaceful, deeply peaceful. There is a tranquility and acceptance within such a person which makes that person seem like a solid bridge... The eyes of such a person usually reveal that the person has gone through a time of real suffering, a crisis, some terrible challenge. But in the midst of the pain, he/she has discovered solid footing... There is a deep, quiet, indefinable strength... Only rarely does one come across such a person. When it happens, you know it. There is power in a person of peace.

In the Gospel lesson today we heard about a man who was not peaceful. The Bible tells about him, even revealing how short of physical stature he was. "Zacchaeus was a wee little man..." He was short, and he came up short in terms of the way he was regarded by the community. He was wealthy because he made money off his own Jewish people by collecting taxes for the Roman government. He was hated by just about everybody.

The story of Zacchaeus is found only in Luke's gospel. As with all of Luke's stories, though this story has a human being, Zacchaeus, as the main character, the story is actually meant to tell us something about God as God's heart is revealed through Jesus.

This story takes place just one week before Jesus was crucified. At this point, Jesus was still attracting adoring crowds, crowds thrilled over the spreading belief that he just might be the One, the "King," the Messiah, the Savior for whom they were waiting. So as Jesus passed through the area, a crowd gathered. The small man Zacchaeus wanted to see what all the hub-bub was about. There in the crowd, Zacchaeus had two large problems: one, he was hated by his fellow Jews, and two, he was extremely short. So Zacchaeus, for all his wealth, couldn't see past the crowd. It is easy to imagine that nobody would willingly step aside to let him get through to the front of the crowd! But Zacchaeus was a pushy sort of person, which is probably why he was so successful in his job. He pushed himself forward and climbed up a tree. (pause)

Most of us have experienced someone who was pushy, who would maneuver in a crowd without showing any concern at all for anyone else's position or needs. Someone one who pushed ahead of you in line and did not show even a smidgen of remorse. Or the person who drives along the right shoulder in the breakdown lane to the front of a traffic jam and then cuts in at the last minute. It was just such a person who climbed that tree that day so long ago, to catch a glimpse of Jesus. He was a person we would never want to have as a neighbor. There Zacchaeus was, up in a tree, climbing for his own benefit, struggling to gain a vantage point, scrapping for his own kind of stature.

So why in the world did Jesus stop and have anything to do with Zacchaeus? Why not some nicer person, someone struggling to be good, or a widow, or at least a normal citizen of Jericho? But Jesus didn't often do what folks thought he would or should do, so even as the crowd pressed around him, Jesus stopped in front of this unusual, highly disliked man, and told Zacchaeus to hurry up and get down out of that tree, because Jesus wanted to go to his home and have dinner with him.

The crowd was not happy with Jesus' choice of hosts. There was much grumbling over it. Perhaps this

choice by Jesus was part of what made the people go from shouting "Hosanna" to demanding "Crucify Him" in one week. Luke tells us that, in the face of the crowd's grumbling, Zacchaeus stood there and said to Jesus, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anybody, I will pay back four times as much."

Did you notice how Zacchaeus suddenly tried to become good? Jesus saw him and called him by name, and the man changed 180 degrees and everything ended up being fine.... But perhaps not, at least not in the way Zacchaeus might have hoped. William Willimon says, "Once Zacchaeus declares his righteous intentions, one might expect Jesus to fall over Zacchaeus, saying, 'Great! See? Anybody, even a little weasel like Zacchaeus, can become a really nice guy if he's appealed to in the right way. That's why I always make it a point to eat in the homes of sinful little losers like Zacchaeus so I can transform them into good people.'" (*Pulpit Resource*)

But Jesus didn't respond in this way. Instead, he said to Zacchaeus, "Today salvation has come to this house, because Zacchaeus, too, is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost." Jesus claimed the Jew who had become wealthy by serving the Roman government as a "son of Abraham," by which Jesus reminded Zacchaeus of his real identity, that Zacchaeus was one who belonged to God and whose first duty in life was to live in covenant with God. God, NOT the Roman government, was Zacchaeus' true wealth.

In the face of Zacchaeus' declaration that he would change his ways, Jesus told him that Jesus was there with him in order to save THE LOST. As Zacchaeus was trying to set up his own "tree" of righteousness ("I'll give back what I took from people and make things all right"), Jesus was telling him that he was a "son of Abraham," which meant that he was like all the rest of Israel -- unable to save himself, unable to stand under the judgment of God. Another way of interpreting Jesus' response to Zacchaeus: "Look, Zacchaeus, you may do good works and give away all your money until you are named 'Man of the Year,' but you will still need saving. Get down off your high horse and realize that, through my call to you today and what I am about to go through in Jerusalem, you are being SAVED. You are lost, but God is saving you. No ladder of your own goodness can make this possible; only the power of God's love for those who are lost." .... (Idea from W. Willimon, edited a bit by FTE)

Where does this leave *us*? No matter how good we try to be, no matter how much good we try to do (Jesus DID tell us to care for otheers, in no uncertain terms!), we cannot save ourselves. Fortunately for us, the God who made us and knows all about us, the good and the bad, is determined to save us! E. Stanley Jones said it: "Instead of us meeting God on the topmost rung of the ladder of worthiness, God comes down and meets us at the bottommost rung where we are sinners." (*Song of Ascents*, altered a bit by FTE) No matter who we are, no matter what stature we have achieved through our good or bad works, each one of us is lost in some way and needs for God to find us. That's what this Christianity stuff is about: the Bible describes God's hunger to "find" us, to save us, to come to where we are and to feed us true identity and peace. Then, fed and with the peace which passes all understanding, we are to go forth to be part of God's saving work in the lives of others.

Whether we are short or tall, old or young, good citizens or marginal ones, acclaimed or rejected by others, sick or healthy, rich or poor, God offers us a deep peace which can sustain us through every instant and incident of our lives. This peace can come only as a gift from God, as we are led to KNOW that we belong to God and that our lives are really and truly held in God's everlasting arms... The years

will pass, the newspaper headlines and obituaries will keep coming, we'll do some wonderful things and make some bad mistakes, we will have good times and hard times; but whatever happens or does not happen, the God who is Lord of all of life, now and forever, seeks to save us. He comes to us; we cannot do it ourselves. We don't create our own tree to pull ourselves up; God has already provided the Tree, the Cross of his Son, who laid down his life so that we might have life. And through his Spirit our Lord comes to name us, to remind who and whose we really are, and to help us accept God's saving grace. This is our hope, this is our challenge, this is our peace. May we receive it; may we share it. In the name of God: the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.