

Slide 1 – By the tender mercy of our God

“By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us.” (Luke 1.78) Life with Jesus is about one’s whole life being opened up.

In the story of the day Jesus shows great mercy on a questionable character, Zacchaeus, and the tax man’s response is pure joy in this delightful gospel story. This is one more of Luke’s stories illustrating how we, the lost, are found by God, and cannot help but rejoice. What a great story for today as we have been reflecting on being gathered *Because of God’s Great Mercy* in recent weeks. What a great story about a person some might think is beyond redemption. We will learn again that what seems impossible to us is always possible for God. Jesus shows mercy to him and proclaims him as a true member of the community of faith. With that, it is a great story for All Saints’ Day, too. He is clearly a sinner who in Jesus’ presence is also a saint, that is, a person redeemed by God.

The children’s song from a couple of generations ago suggests Zacchaeus is happy to host Jesus at his home. This story is greater than just being happy.

Zacchaeus was a chief tax man. Being a tax accountant does not make a person sinful, in Jesus’ day or now. But he was the chief tax collector gathering funds for the foreign oppressor Rome. The Roman system for collecting taxes encouraged bad behavior. Romans sold the right to collect taxes to the highest bidder at an auction. The person who won the auction was given a province. Besides extracting the specific taxes in the province, the chief collector had to have enough to cover the cost of the bribe he paid to get the job, to pay wages of those he employed to help collect the taxes, plus some profit for himself. Corruption was built into the system.

What is a person to do if one wants to be the best in their field for their time? You learn the system and you work it to your advantage. Perhaps he thought his efforts would please his wife and family, giving them the best that wealth could buy. Perhaps he wanted to be known as the richest and most powerful person in the province. If he thought in those ways, there would be incentive for him to acquire more and more. We don’t know what motivated Zacchaeus in his life before he met Jesus.

Zacchaeus heard Jesus was coming through town. Zacchaeus, a man of some authority, became curious about Jesus who commanded considerable authority. Zacchaeus likely noticed Jesus was one who had a following long before Twitter. He had likely heard that Jesus told stories that made hearers wonder, had healed with a single word, and gathered to him the curious of both the rich and the poor. Did Zacchaeus want something from Jesus besides seeing him? We do not know.

Slide 2 – Sycamore Tree

What we do know is this. The crowds were too large for Zacchaeus to get close to Jesus along the roadway where he would travel. Time was critical. Zacchaeus, a man of public position and notoriety humiliated himself by running in public to find a vantage point. Why would a man who valued power and money be running anxiously through the streets?

In his frantic search he comes to a sycamore tree just outside of the city. In further humiliation, he climbs into its broad branches. He couldn’t control the interest his running had aroused. Some likely mocked him that day as he waited in the tree. He could only hope that he would be hidden enough to see Jesus but not be noticed much.

Jesus, though, has a gift for seeing and affirming what others do not see. In Luke's narrative Jesus notices people, calls them out, and by the gift of the Holy Spirit they are transformed. Jesus was the first to practice mindfulness. You know, being so present in the moment that he never misses an opportunity. He was in the moment as he passed through Jericho. He was able to take in all that surrounded him including the curious, wealthy, corrupt, and mocked Zacchaeus.

Jesus had noticed others before. The first tax collector Jesus engages in his mission plan is Levi. When Levi heard the call of Jesus, he got up, left everything and followed him. The mercy of our God called Levi into the disciple life, into a life of faith and Levi's response was to focus his attention on Jesus.

In Luke's narrative, Jesus was teaching in one of the places of worship when he noticed a woman enter who had been crippled for eighteen years. When Jesus saw her, he spoke to her saying, "Woman, you are set free from your ailment." When he reached out and touched her, immediately she stood straight up and began praising God. The tender mercy of our God transformed a woman from societal rejection into useful life and she rejoiced in the transformation of her life.

Jesus was good at being in the moment. He was able to see Zacchaeus among the many who pressed in on him. Though Jesus was determined to get to Jerusalem, as he passed through Jericho, he paused at the tree, noticed Zacchaeus, called him by name and invited himself over to Zacchaeus home. Jesus saw opportunity in Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was on the outside of the community of faith looking in, wondering if there was more to life than what he was living. Jesus called out to him and included him in the new community he was forming on earth. Jesus language was of inclusion. Jesus language is the language of grace. The whole trajectory of Zacchaeus' life changed.

Jesus named him a righteous member of community of faith. "He is a son of Abraham." Jesus connected faith to family by requesting that he stay at the home of the tax collector. Jesus countered the obvious public scorn by asking in front of the community that Zacchaeus would be his host in Jericho. Zacchaeus responded by correcting the overreach of his greed and giving new attention to the poor. He gave half of his assets to the poor and to those he had cheated, he paid back four times as much, far beyond what the law required.

Slide 3 – Today salvation has come to this house

Salvation had truly come this day in the tender mercy of our God and the transforming presence of his grace. In a moment, the long awaited Jubilee was occurring. A rich man was gladly releasing the wealth he had hoarded and in exchange he found himself in the presence of the precious Savior of the universe. The longing of the ages was unfolding. The song of Mary was coming true. The rich were becoming empty and loving it! The hungry and the poor were lifted up. The joy of the lost being found resounded again!

In 2019 poverty still exists. Bread for the World, an organization that fights for social change which can end hunger in the world celebrates the progress of 50 years of collaborative work. But there is still more that needs to be done. The current estimate is that hunger and poverty can end by 2030 with needed legislation that supports families to obtain affordable healthcare, quality education, livable wages, affordable housing to name a few. They encourage learning about the issues of hunger and poverty and believe that if we have understanding we will use our will in the kind of action which alleviates and ends hunger.

At St. John's I see ministry and mission that targets those who live in poverty and in need, like efforts to feed children and families at Locust Lane and through Feed My People. Caring Ministry reaches out to provide a Christmas with good things. Summer Stretch kids are given opportunities to serve the community. There are multiple efforts to give the homeless what they need. There is a passion here to reach out with the tender mercy of our God.

The story of Zacchaeus is compatible with the themes of mercy and welcome that are part of St. John's. And it touches on a particularly Lutheran theme. It demonstrates the paradox that we live with daily. We are at one and the same moment a sinner and a saint. Zacchaeus was known in his town as a man familiar with corruption executing it in his life daily. In an encounter with Jesus, he is noticed, called and welcomed as a righteous person, a saint, worthy of the gracious presence of Christ. We see the consequence of the grace and mercy of God in this sinful one as he repents and makes restitution for his life, developing a way to share his wealth rather than hoard it. He is truly the paradoxical character, at once both a sinner and a saint, no matter what the rest of the town says, which makes him a good Lutheran.

Slide 4 – worship at St. John's

Isn't that something we strive to be as we gather here at St. John's? We strive to welcome all because we know the truth. We are all saved by grace. We are all in the same position before God, without distinction. "We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's." (Romans 14:7-8) All who gather at St. John's, whether weak or strong, whether sinful or righteous, are the same before God.

Look around you, beside you, behind you, in front of you at the ones who are gathered today. What you see are saints and sinners, sinners and saints, young and old, male and female, worthy and unworthy, welcomed by Jesus, made as one in the body of Christ through the water and the word at the font, and nourished with meal at the table. Each of us and all of us are knit together in the Lord in a way that cannot be humanly undone. We are part of a movement in Christ that is headed toward mercy for all and needs fulfilled.

Jesus taught his disciples to look to him for life, mercy, forgiveness, and all that is needed. Jesus told stories of people noticing the abundance of God. "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us." (Luke 1.78) Life with Jesus dawned upon Zacchaeus and transformed his life. In our gathering for worship, we too, find that we are transformed and held fast by the mercy of God.

Almighty God, in holy baptism you have knit your chosen people together into one communion of saints in the body of Christ. Give to your whole church in heaven and on earth your light and your peace.