

## 31st Ordinary Sunday C

The passage for our reflection today is “the son of Man has come to seek and to save the lost.” That was the mission of Jesus. Again and again, Jesus referred to this mission in his parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, the parable of the prodigal son, and in today’s gospel. His mission finds a practical expression in the conversion story of Zacchaeus. We do not like outsiders in our space.

A church had a problem with outsiders using its parking lot. So the pastor posted a sign that read, “Church Parking—for Members Only.” Underneath was a warning: “Trespassers will be baptized.” Zacchaeus was an outsider for the people of his town. He was a tax collector, and tax collectors were hated for their support to the Romans. Though he was a Jew, he collected taxes for the Romans. Often, the tax collectors collected taxes way more than what was needed to be paid to the government and kept the rest as their profit. They in fact extorted the people for a profit that was unjust. There was no upper limit as to how much tax they should collect. So they collected as much as they could and helped themselves to a generous profit. Hence, they were despised and hated by all for being greedy and unjust.

A pastor was very unhappy seeing too many one dollar bills in the collection. One of his parishioners was a presidential candidate. During a meeting in the parish, the candidate asked the pastor, “Father, tell me one thing my government can do to help your church if I am elected president.” Without hesitation the pastor said, “Quit making one-dollar bills!”

Jesus might have shocked the people around him and the community when he told Zacchaeus, “Come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.” Zacchaeus had heard a lot about Jesus. When he knew that Jesus was passing by his street, Zacchaeus was determined to see him. But, he was a short man, so in order to have a good look at Jesus, he climbed a tree. He did not expect all that attention that Jesus gave him. An encounter with Jesus changed the life of Zacchaeus forever. He promised to make restitution for his unjust practices. And then Jesus said, “Today salvation has come to this house.” We will have complete remission of our sins only when we make restitution. If we have been unjust or cheated or stolen, we need to make restitution.

Zacchaeus experienced firsthand the mercy and forgiveness of God. God’s mercy is available for all sinners. The greatest obstacle to receive God’s mercy is our unwillingness to admit our own sins. The second greatest obstacle is our unwillingness to repent. Once a man prayed, “Lord, I thank you for, so far today, I have done all right. I have not gossiped, not lost my temper, not been greedy, grumpy, nasty, selfish, or overindulgent. But in a few minutes, I am going to get out of bed. Probably from then on, I will need a lot more of your help.” Here is a man who knows his weakness and is willing to seek God’s help.

God’s mercy is available to any sinner who responds to God’s invitation with repentance. The first reading reminds us that God has mercy on all. In the first reading, the writer is responding to the question, “Why doesn’t God do away with all evil?” God created everything and, therefore, there is God’s spirit in everything. He rebukes the offenders little by little. He warns them and reminds them of the sins they are committing, so that they might abandon their wickedness and believe in Him. God is rich in mercy and slow to anger (Ps. 148:8). I do not think Zacchaeus’ decision to change his life was something that he made on the spur of the moment. Perhaps he himself was disgusted with his life and was looking for an opportunity to change. He was aware of his sinfulness and wanted to change. And now that Jesus presented that opportunity, Zaccheus did not let that pass. He perhaps did not expect that all these things would happen. He was just curious to see Jesus. When he took that step, and opened a little the door of his heart to Jesus, great things happened in his life. What happened to Zacchaeus will happen to us if we are prepared to open the door of our hearts to Jesus. This door does not have a handle on the outside. So it has to be opened from the inside.