

Someone once wrote an article saying that we see others only insofar as we can find common ground with them. Otherwise they remain “other”, outside of us, apart from us. Therefore, easier to gossip about, act spitefully towards or nourish resentment or hate for them in our hearts. This is how the crowd views Zacchaeus today. He is totally other. A traitor to his people by collecting taxes for the imperial Roman government. A cheat, a swindler, a defrauder. Probably some other names that are less polite, too. Those living in Jericho saw only this in Zacchaeus. They saw him as the man who regularly stole from them. They saw him only as evil. And he knew how they felt about him, what they said about him. All their condemnation and judgment did not one whit to bring Zacchaeus to repentance. Instead it set up a wall of hate and rebounded on them.

Jesus came to Jericho. Zacchaeus was inspired to climb a tree to see Him. Jesus called this man, hated by everyone, Jesus called Zacchaeus down “Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” (Luke 19:5) Zacchaeus received Jesus joyfully. Jesus saw in Zacchaeus someone more than a cheating tax collector who happily went about defrauding his fellow citizens. Jesus saw underneath all the dirt of sin to the depth of Zacchaeus’ heart. He saw His own image in Zacchaeus. Jesus called forth deep into Zacchaeus’ heart by asking to stay with him. Jesus brought out something in Zacchaeus that perhaps Zacchaeus didn’t even realize and certainly that the crowd did not know nor want to know.

By Jesus’ presence, by His request to stay with Zacchaeus, Zacchaeus turned away from his former way of life. He turned away from the cheating, the swindling, the defrauding. And he went further, he restored not only what he had stolen but did so four times as much. And he took half of all he owned and gave it to the poor. Zacchaeus hastened along the path of repentance not because of the crowd’s condemnation and judgment but because of who Jesus is and what being near Jesus did to him. For this reason Jesus told him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of man came to seek and to save the lost.” (Luke 19:9-10)

But the crowd, they had Zacchaeus pegged, stereotyped, as one thing and one thing only: a sinner. The people were aghast that Jesus didn’t come to stay with any of them, people who lived according to Law God gave to Moses. No, Jesus went to stay with an outlaw, a sinner! How could this be? They lived good lives, didn’t they deserve to have Jesus stay with one of them? Zacchaeus was a thief but Jesus spend the night at his house. Zacchaeus repented of his sins by restoring what he had taken and helping the destitute. He changed his life. But the crowd would not accept Zacchaeus repentance. They saw him only one way and that was the way they would continue to see him: an enemy. Their hatred rebounded on them. They cast themselves away from God.

“The man who cries out against evil men but does not pray for them will never know the grace of God... In order to abide in the love of God it is essential for anger and ‘hate’ to attain their maximum intensity but be directed against the sin that lives in me, against the evil active in me – in me, not in my brother.” said St. Silouan the Athonite. Because the people of Jericho did not see their own sin but only the sin of Zacchaeus and hated him for it, they remained to be pitied for their loss. Because Jesus saw His image, though fallen, in Zacchaeus, because He called Zacchaeus and made friends with him, Zacchaeus confronted his own sin. He confronted it and turned away from it, even though the people would have none of it. Zacchaeus welcomed God into his home, into his heart, and by this he found not judgment, not condemnation but salvation, friendship with God, life, the fullness of life, in Jesus Christ.