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'Come. I want to enter your house'

by Thomas Gumbleton

The Peace Pulpit

This is one of those Sundays when, if we listen to the lessons very carefully, especially the first lesson in the gospel lesson, we will come to see how Jesus so clearly fulfills what had been revealed to people through God's chosen people in the Old Testament. In that first lesson, as I mentioned in introducing it, we discover someone who has a very profound insight into God. This person has come to know God very deeply and shares with us the kind of God that we worship: "Because you are Almighty, you are merciful to God."

That's not something we ordinarily put together -- someone being very powerful and yet very merciful. Someone who usually acts out of power isn't merciful; we think of merciful as being weak, so someone who is merciful is usually considered as weak. But God is Almighty and because of that, God is also merciful. God overlooks our sins, the writer tells us, and gives us time to repent, but then even more, we're told how God is a God of love, "You love everything that exists and hate nothing that you have made." In fact, the writer says, "If you had hated anything, you would not have formed it." What we're learning here is how God, as a God of love, loves all other things into being. All of creation is loved into existence by God. Every one of us is loved into existence. That's why we're here, because God has loved us individually, each of us personally. God knows us, loves us, draws us into being and then "how could anything endure if you did not will it, and how could anything last that you had not willed?"

You see, not only has God loved us into being, but we continue to exist at every moment, only because the love of God is sustaining us. See, without God's love, we wouldn't be. It wouldn't be that we would die; we just wouldn't be, we would be nothingness. But God has loved us into being and sustains us by loving us at every instant. This is an extraordinary understanding of God, and each of us must try to begin

to experience this and understand 'how much God loves me, totally loves me.'

Then finally, "You have compassion on all because all is yours, O God, Lover of Life." God is always having compassion on us, always loving us, and we must never forget this and try always to be aware of how much we're loved. It will change our lives truly if we come to experience this more deeply. And that teaching from the Book of Wisdom is so clearly reinforced by what happens in the gospel today.

We might not be so keenly aware of it, but the crowd knew who Zacchaeus was. He was a tax collector, one called a publican. Jesus was often criticized because Jesus ate and spent time with publicans and sinners, and tax collectors were among the worst because a tax collector was often in contact with the Roman authorities because the tax collector worked for the Roman authorities who had occupied the land of Jesus, and it was a harsh occupation, and they demanded high taxes.

This person, a Jew, had become one of the people who supported the Romans and so he was hated. He also was unworthy even to go into the temple because he mixed often with Gentiles. And yet somewhere deep in his heart, he had a longing for God. That's why he wanted to see Jesus, see who Jesus is, what he's really like. He had heard of him obviously, so he does something that must have caused people to kind of look on him with scorn. He gets out ahead of the crowd and he climbs up a tree -- this grown man climbs a tree and is sitting on the limb, waiting for Jesus to pass by.

I can easily believe (and I think you would agree) when Jesus came there and looked up, he must have smiled at this man climbing a tree, opening himself to scorn and ridicule, but as Jesus smiled at Zacchaeus, he filled the heart of Zacchaeus with joy because he says to Zacchaeus, "Come down quickly. I'm going to come with you today and to your house, spend time with you." Zacchaeus is so happy, he jumps down and immediately goes home to prepare for Jesus to come.

Each of us can easily, if we do enter into prayer and reflect on this incident in the gospel, see how Jesus looks at us, "Come. I want to enter your house. I want to be in your heart. I want to be with you, enter deeply into your being." If we have that desire that Zacchaeus did, Jesus will look at us and say, "Come down. I want to enter into your house," but there's one more thing that happens, and it's very important and must happen to us too.

Zacchaeus determines to change his life dramatically because he experiences this love of Jesus. "I will give half of what I have to the poor." He's ready to let go and to follow Jesus dramatically. Jesus had said often, "Blessed are the poor," and Jesus had always reached out to the poor, shared with the poor, and this is what Zacchaeus has understood immediately, he has to shed some of his riches, share with those who do not have. "And if I've cheated anyone, I'll repay them four times over." Zacchaeus is ready to change his life.

Perhaps we too, as we open ourselves to the coming of Jesus into our hearts in a deeper way than ever before, must prepare ourselves for that coming of Jesus by changing our lives in some way. Each of us can look into our hearts and determine how we must change in order to be more welcoming to Jesus by being more like Jesus. They can be dramatic changes too, because Jesus teaches us a way to God that is not like the culture in which we live.

Jesus, for example, teaches us "Love one another, but don't just love those who love you, love your enemy." Are we ready to change in that way? To love those who hurt us, return good for evil, give up violence and power and might and transform our lives and our world by loving. That would be a dramatic change for most of us to do that very profoundly and deeply or, as in today's gospel, share what we have more generously with others, and how important that is for us today.

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Perhaps you're aware, in the last couple of weeks, another report is published, as they are regularly, about the number of poor people in our country. The number has gone up. There was a point when we were reducing the poor in our country significantly. Now it's back to where it was 30 or 40 years ago, 44 million people in our country -- a country which we still think of as the riches country in the world -- 44 million people now in poverty.

That means, as they are described, being without food security. In other words, they don't know if they're going to get enough food every day to eat. Maybe you and I have more than we really need. We're not going to give away half of it, I don't think, but certainly we can share some of what we have and find ways to reach out to those who need to receive from us, and to share in the goods of the earth that God has given for all, and not for a few. Again, if we try to make these changes in our lives, truly Jesus will help us to know God deeply, and Jesus will draw us to him and enter into our lives in a more profound way.

Maybe the last thing that we should consider today is simply to make our own the prayer that Paul prays for the Christians at Thessalonica, and each of us prays this prayer for ourselves and for each other. It's a beautiful prayer:

"We constantly pray for you. May our God make you worthy of God's calling. May God, by God's power, fulfill your good purposes and your good works prompted by faith, and in that way the name of Jesus will be glorified through you and you through him according to the loving plan of God and of Christ Jesus the Lord."

I hope we will make that prayer for ourselves and for each other, and then we will make those changes in our lives that will make us welcoming people to Jesus.

[This homily was preached at St. Hilary Parish, Redford, Mich.]

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