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November 2, 2019

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“He has come to stay at the house of a sinner” (Luke 19:5).

Luke’s Gospel is always rich in details, and each one holds fresh insights into how to respond to Jesus in our lives.

First, Jesus is just passing through Jericho on his way to Jerusalem, and his thoughts are focused on the climactic events that will transpire there, including the cleansing of the temple, his arrest and death. Perhaps it was the thought of his crucifixion that caused Jesus to stop and look up at the man in the tree.

He will soon change places with the man in the sycamore tree. Zacchaeus will be saved because Jesus is lost, his life given for the life of a sinner. Luke invites us to reflect on this theme of substitution. At every stop, with every healing, Jesus is being loaded down with the damage of sin, the suffering of a broken world, so that when he mounts the cross, he will be carrying both sin and death on our behalf.

Jesus is just passing through, and everything depends on people taking the first step to seek him out. The blind man Bartimaeus, the woman with the hemorrhage, the woman at Simon the Pharisee’s house, the 10 lepers, and Zacchaeus—they all put themselves in the path of Jesus because they want to see him, to touch him, to understand what his presence means.

Second, another Lucan theme is that Jesus is a magnet for sinners and those who are suffering. He is looking for them and they are being drawn to him. Though the tax collector is apparently a stranger, Jesus calls him by name: “Zacchaeus, come down.” And as if by pure spontaneity, Jesus immediately invites himself to

Zacchaeus' house. Of all the righteous people in Jericho, a man who is outcast to his neighbors and a notorious collaborator with the Roman tax system is chosen to host the famous Jesus of Nazareth. The town is outraged. Mercy is all that matters to Jesus, and Zacchaeus responds joyfully and in overflowing measure.

What can we make of this story for ourselves? Jesus is passing by, and we are moved to seek him out. If we stay home or remain just distant observers, will we encounter him, or is there something we must do to make this happen? One source of reluctance is that perhaps we think we need something good to show him, our virtues and sacrifices, our good works and our faith. We want to impress him.

What if Jesus would rather have our sinfulness, our wounds and our troubles? Can we bare our souls to him, expose our secret shames and hidden faults? He wants the real us. Of all the places where we would rather welcome him, Jesus chooses to stay at the house of a sinner, the place in us where we are most in need of healing, forgiveness and salvation. This is the joy of the Gospel.

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