

“What Do We Say”
Isaiah 1:10-18; Luke 19:1-10

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Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Along the way he passes through Jericho. Jericho is an important town. A number of roads go through it. It's near the Jordan river. It's an important trading center. That means there are a lot of people around.

Before long there's a good-sized crowd surrounding Jesus. There are the twelve disciples. There are those who travel with Jesus but are not part of the twelve. And there are a lot of people in Jericho who want to see this man everyone has been talking about. So, as Jesus walks along a crowd gathers around him.

Zacchaeus wants to see, too. Remember, Zacchaeus is a chief tax collector. And he is rich. Probably one of the wealthiest men in Jericho. He's also short. Not his fault. Nothing he did. But every time he tries to get close to Jesus the crowd blocks him.

Odd, isn't it? For an important person like Zacchaeus, you would think the crowd would part like the Red Sea. But they don't. They block him. They are choosing to keep him away from Jesus.

Zacchaeus, though, is undeterred. He runs ahead. That's an important detail. At this time, it was unseemly for a man to run. Gentlemen proceeded at a stately pace. But Zacchaeus is in a hurry. He doesn't care if they laugh. He wants to see Jesus.

So, he runs ahead and climbs into a Sycamore tree. Again, not something you expect grown men to do. But Zacchaeus doesn't care. Let the crowd laugh. He wants to see Jesus.

And he does. Jesus stops. He looks up. “Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus!” Zacchaeus, what? Is Jesus going to chew him out for collecting taxes, for collaborating with the Romans? Is Jesus going to call him a sinner and a disgrace to Israel? That would please the crowd. Get everybody on his side. What's Jesus going to say?

“Zacchaeus! Get down from there. I must stay at your house today.” Wow. That's different.

Today, we would say inviting yourself into a stranger's home is rude. Even the rich and famous don't do that. But in Jesus' time, it was a sign of respect. If someone important invited themselves into your home, it was a way of making you important, too. It was a way of saying you are special. You matter.

Jesus could have said anything. But what he said showed his respect for Zacchaeus.

The crowd doesn't like it. They're mad. "He's gone to be the guest of a sinner. Can you believe it? He knows who Zacchaeus is. Why does he want to associate with someone like that?" But Jesus doesn't see us the way everyone else does.

The crowd only sees one side of Zacchaeus. They pigeon-hole him. You know what I mean. We've all done it. That boy will never change. That girl will never grow up. That marriage won't last. That church might as well be dead.

But Jesus doesn't pigeonhole. He doesn't pigeonhole Zacchaeus and he doesn't pigeonhole us. Jesus sees what we are, and Jesus sees what we can be.

Zacchaeus is touched. He's moved. No one has ever known him like this. No one has ever treated him this well. Zacchaeus climbs down from the tree, stands there, and says. . . .

What does he say? Does he say, "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the temple in Jerusalem. I will sacrifice a lamb every day for six months. I will fast three times a week and pray five times a day." Is that what he says?

Is that what we say? When we have been fully known, when God sees us clearly, when God ignores the pigeonholes everyone has dropped us into, when we are so desperate to know God we run in public, grown men and women wearing our Sunday best, climbing into a sycamore tree where everyone can see us, and Jesus comes along and loves us just as we are, how do we respond?

"Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor. I will give to the food pantry. I will make a special offering for the people who lost everything in the hurricane. I will volunteer at Broken Bread every week and will vote for the candidate most concerned for the legal rights of minorities. I will worship and praise you on Sunday mornings and by never lying to my neighbor and by sending supper to the single parent with small children at least three times every month."

Is that what we should say? Is that more in line with what God wants?

Friends – God sees us and God knows us fully, completely, all we are. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God has invited God's self into our homes and into our hearts.

How should we respond? How should we respond to God's great love? It's not a secret. Both the prophet Isaiah and Zacchaeus give us the answer.

May we respond well. Amen.