

Sermon for Diocesan Convention
Holy Eucharist and Ordination
October 31, 2004
Midland Texas

Did you know that music is probably the most powerful means of teaching and learning. How did you learn your alphabet? Was it ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOP? How many advertizing jingles can you remember off the top of your head, right now. I bet if I started to sing, "My bologna has a first name, its O S C A R..." I bet you could finish the next line.

Our grandmothers and grandfathers in the faith knew this inherently when they taught us such songs as "Jesus loves me this I know..." Or "Jesus wants me for a sunbeam to shine for him each day..." Many Bible stories are told in child-like story/song form. "The Lord said to Noah, build you an arky, arky, build it out of hickory barky, barky, children of the Lord." Or "A wise man built his house upon a rock..." I hope by now you are remembering, putting back together, re-membering some of the story songs of your childhood. And today there is "Zacchaeus was a wee little

man, a wee little man was he....”Do any of you remember that song from your childhood? It tells of the encounter of the rich tax collector and the Galilean.

Going beyond the song, let’s look into this meeting of the sinner and the Saviour. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem, his last trip from Galilee to Jerusalem; a journey which will take him to crucifixion, death, and resurrection. Sometime earlier he had set his face toward the city which persecutes the prophets, knowing full well that this was not only a dangerous path, but a fatal step for him. As Jesus entered Jericho, a crowd gathered around the teacher as he makes his way into the city, ostensibly with no known destination in the city. A man named Zacchaeus—which interestingly means “pure and innocent one” hears of Jesus’ approach and desires to see this famous man for himself. Because of the press of the crowd, and, as Luke has it, since Zacchaeus was small of stature, he climbed a sycamore tree.

Now, as you know, this was not just another Jerichoan; he was a hated collaborator. And not only a tax collector, but a notorious, rich tax collector. To continue what we heard in Friday night’s sermon, Zacchaeus was not rich toward God. He had gained his

wealth by overcharging his fellow Jews the hated taxes imposed by the oppressive Roman Empire. From what we know of modern psychology because of his stature he may well have had a mean streak, jealous over his height and determined to make others pay—both literally and figuratively.

But as is so often the case, Jesus turns the story on end. He changes all of the normal boundaries and reverses roles.

As Jesus passes the sycamore tree, he looks up into the tree and sees this man. In all likelihood there were people in trees all along the path, perhaps even more than just Zacchaeus in this same tree. What does Jesus do? Of all things, he calls this hated man by name and gives him an imperative to hurry home to host him for the day.

Hospitality in the middle East is an inviolable proposition. It is not just a social obligation, it is a religious one. Throughout biblical times and into the Christian era, hospitality was considered a basic tenet of the faith. In the Middle Ages, Dante, the great medieval Italian poet, reserves the lowest circles of the Inferno for those who refuse or violate hospitality. Besides regicide, Macbeth's sin is murdering Duncan while the king was a guest in the Thane of Glawdor's castle. Even on the prairie, hospitality is an unwritten

law of the land. The stranger, as well as family and friends, have cause to expect the warmth of the hearth and provender and a secure spot to rest. Over and over in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, welcoming the stranger is of the essence of life itself.

Isn't it interesting that it is Jesus who invites himself into Zacchaeus's life, not the tax collector who asks Jesus to come to dinner. We begin to see here the radical shift that is taking place in customs and traditions, in guest and host, in all of life that comes with Jesus's call to transformation.

The crowd does what is absolutely predictable at this point; they begin to murmur. Isn't that a delightful word—murmur. It is what grammarians call “onomatopoeia”. Some of us who are old enough to have been in school when strict grammar was taught know that this means a word which sounds exactly like what it describes. Onomatopoeia—BUZZ. The crowd *murmurs*. They are visibly disturbed and even angry because this holy man has gone into the house of a sinner—the antithesis of a righteous man.

Watch what happens next: Zacchaeus has a change of heart and proposes a change of life. Simply being in Jesus' presence, simply hosting the Lord in his home, has elicited a transformation,

not unlike the immediate transformation which describes the response of the 12 to Jesus's call. But wait—Jesus has not told him to do anything. Unlike the rich young ruler, Jesus has not told Zacchaeus to sell all his possessions and give the proceeds to the poor. Neither has he told the “wee little man” to give up his livelihood as He did Matthew, also a tax collector when he called Matthew to follow him. Zacchaeus knows how rotten he has been and vows to restore what are legally stolen goods to his victims.

Now the biggest surprise of all occurs: Jesus takes Zacchaeus's repentance entirely seriously and declares the reality of his salvation, including him as a “son of Abraham” one of God's faithful family, and yet one of those in need of salvation.

I would like to posit that the theme of this story is hospitality; indeed I believe that is the theme of Luke's entire Gospel. In this story, the host seems to be Zacchaeus. However as the tale unfolds, he is the guest as the Lord of God's Kingdom invites him into the realm of true righteousness. As hospitality is offered by Zacchaeus, something dramatic occurs: the divine comes in as the guest, only to turn the host into guest and the guest into host. How often do we find this theme in Scripture? To name only two: by the Oaks of

Mamre, with Abraham and the three men/angels; who here offers the blessing, Abraham or the trio? Or later in Luke after the resurrection at Emmaeus with Cleopas and the other disciple; Jesus is the guest, yet he, not the host, offers the blessing; and the disciples recognize him in the breaking of the bread. Or again, the author of Hebrews challenges his hearers to show hospitality to strangers, as these strangers might be angels—or even God. (Heb 13:2).

Even a cursory reading of the four Gospels leads one to understand that Jesus's earthly ministry proclaims welcome to all, perhaps especially the outcasts of this world. That welcome is not shared by many in Galilee or Judea. Even his closest friends on occasion would have preferred that Jesus avoid the less desirable—or outright unclean—persons that the Lord engages. Remember the many lepers Jesus meets—and even touches, or the Samaritan woman at the well, or children, or the many possessed by demons, or the almost endless encounters with tax collectors and sinners, or the woman with the issue of blood, or the Roman centurion, or the thief on the cross?

And that brings us to the “so what” part of this sermon.

Today we, not I but we, are ordaining a deacon for the Church, one who is to minister “particularly to the poor, the weak, the sick, and the lonely....that in serving the helpless they are serving Christ himself.” (BCP page 543) Too often we look to those who are ordained to do all these things for us, in order that we not be plagued with such people ourselves. Well brothers and sisters, I want to let you in on a little secret. Jesus did not call Mary Collier—or any of those of us who wear funny clothes on Sunday—to do the work of the kingdom for you. He calls us to challenge you and lead you into doing the work of the Body of Christ, practicing Christianity by using the gifts you have to proclaim the kingdom through word and deed.

The radical hospitality which is thoroughly evident in the Gospels is our call to live in Christ and to show Him to this broken and hungry world. Too often we think and act as if we invite Jesus into our gatherings, when in fact, just as He did with Zacchaeus, He invites himself. Then he becomes the host of our party and turns our world upside down.

Our challenge and our call is to be as brash and as welcoming as Jesus himself. Did he not invite you and me into his life, after all?

And are not we all examples of Christ's life and love for our families, our friends, the people we meet at work or at the grocery or at Walmart? Hospitality does not begin and end at our own home's doorsteps or the porch of our churches. Rather it is a way of life that invites everyone we meet into the Christ-life that we bear. We are called to offer to all we meet the same radical hospitality that Jesus our Saviour and Lord offered to Zacchaeus, to Matthew, to Simon the Zealot, to Francis of Assisi, to Martin Luther, to David Pendleton Oakerhater, to you and me.

Mary please stand; it is time for the charge.

You are called to be a deacon, and your call has been affirmed by the Church to be a servant leader. This is not so much a privilege as it is a way of life. It is your duty to insure that we never overlook the needs of those who we would ignore because of poverty, skin color, sickness, language, smell, or whatever would make them outcasts.

Remember, most of Jesus ministry was with the outcast of his day; if you are to proclaim Jesus to us, show us Jesus in your deeds and not just your words. You are to bring the needs of Midland to Holy Trinity and challenge them to do whatever they can to meet those needs. You are to take the resources of the Church to the neediest

of God's creatures. You are to stand with one foot in the Sanctuary and one foot on the poorest street in town. There is freedom in that knowledge. Since you work with those whose lives are ending, you have seen great courage. Show us don't tell us what it is like to die to self and live in the fullness of Christ.

And finally I encourage you to learn to live the prayer written by Bishop Brent of the Philippines which is found on page 101 of our Prayer Book:

“Lord Jesus Christ, you stretched out your arms on the hard wood of the cross that everyone might come within the reach of your saving embrace; So clothe us in your Spirit that we, reaching out our hands in love, may bring those who do not know you to the knowledge and love of you; for the honor of your Name. *Amen.*”

Mary, call us to that kind of service in Jesus.