

From The Pastor

What do you do with a really good God? Does God need a public relations campaign to boost the divine image? Sometimes one would think so. Our God is a God of goodness and love, profound mercy, and endless patience, yet we seem to resist full trust in God's desire for our good.

Ancient writings of nations other than Israel are steeped in the gods of good and evil, fear and punishment, appeasement and obedience. In all ancient writings, the God of Israel is Lord of the universe and lover of souls. From the opening lines of the Hebrews scriptures we are told of the goodness of creation and God's pleasure at all he had made. 'And God saw that it was good...'

The Book of Wisdom expresses and affirms the power and providence of a God who is a 'lover of souls'. We understand God to be omniscient and omnipotent. God is all knowing and all-powerful, as the 'whole universe is as a grain of sand in a balance or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth'. Because God is divine, God can do all things; yet all God desires is unity and love of all things in him. For God to be almighty is for God to be unlimited, freely given self-surrender. Love gives all for love. This is God. God loves all that God has made. Why would God make something that he would not love or cherish and care for? So fully present is God to us that his 'imperishable spirit is in all things'.

God can manage divine patience with peace because all is in and under God's truth of love. This is why and how God can call sinners 'little by little' to himself reminding them of a more prudent way of being. Such truths should go a long way to healing our fears and resistance toward God, and establishing a secure relationship of trust and openness.

These truths of God are exemplified in the gospel story of Zacchaeus. It is a wonderful story about the conversion and awakening of this chief tax collector and wealthy man; it is also a clear image of the kindness and love of God in Jesus.

If Jesus were to pass through Madison Heights, would you adjust your schedule to meet him? We are told that Jesus is passing through Jericho, which implies he is on his way somewhere; that somewhere is Jerusalem and the Cross. Yet, his passing through also implies that he is making himself available for those who wish to meet him. Unlike the curious, but unawakened crowd, Zacchaeus is a man who wants to see Jesus. He wants to meet the man and share his mind. Somehow, he sees himself in Jesus.

Jesus is interested in each of us, yet he is especially aware of those who are interested in him. Zacchaeus is interested and Jesus will not miss the opportunity to engage this man. It seems clear that Jesus can read the heart of this seeker, and Jesus is very pleased to change his plans and spend the day at the house of Zacchaeus.

For Zacchaeus, the story is about coming to and claiming his true self. For Jesus, the story is about revealing the true self of God by showing love and acceptance to a sinner ready to repent. Why does Luke bother to tell us that Zach is short? Could he be saying that this is a man who has not yet realized his full stature and dignity? It seems likely. This is an isolated and rejected man who has grown tired of his place in life. Despite social and religious rejection, Zach seems to know an inner dignity and potential that is crying to be realized. Luke gives us the detail that Zacchaeus runs ahead to climb a sycamore tree. When called by Jesus, he hurries down and greets Jesus with joy. These details make a happy story better, but they also serve a purpose. Running and hurrying implies enthusiasm and excitement. Joy is an inner emotion that deeply feels itself in relation to another. Like a kid with a free pass in a candy shop, Zach sees and feels something he has wanted all his life. He wants to be noticed and affirmed for who he really is, and not by the labels and lies that have been cast upon him.

This man knows his sins, but does not let his sins define him. He knows he needs forgiveness and repentance, and he is more than ready to make his intentions known. Back on level ground, face to face with the crowd, he surrenders his identity with money and reclaims his place among the people. Half of what he owns he will give to the poor, and those he cheated he will repay four times more. Maybe he didn't cheat so many after all.

This is a real conversion. A heart has been changed through forgiveness and repentance. Salvation has come to this house, the inner home or heart of Zacchaeus, through wholeness. He has sought out and found his true self through the attention and acceptance of Jesus.

Jesus was the face of God for Zacchaeus. Jesus, a lover of souls, would not have missed the opportunity to speak to this man so ripe and ready for divine grace in his life. Jesus loved Zacchaeus and felt great joy at his conversion, expressed through his energetic words of encouragement. This same kind of encounter is available to all. God is patient and wise, and will see and answer all those who seek him from their heart.

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