

Who here has ever received an invitation? It could be a verbal invitation. Or a written one. It could be an open invitation. Or one that requires you to reserve a space in advance. What does it feel like to receive an invitation? I guess that would depend on who the invitation is from and what it is for, right? I’m at the point in my life when I seem to be receiving countless wedding invitations – they just seem to pile up. Often my response to the invitation depends on how well I know either the bride or groom. How far away the wedding is. And what it will cost me to either attend or be part of the celebration.

Invitations can be a tricky thing – who do you extend one to? Is there a limit to how many people you can have at the party? Do you invite significant others and children, even if you don’t know them? It really boils down to a lot of power (and the stress that can accompany such power), doesn’t it? We live in a world where we are always trying to get ahead, and consciously or unconsciously the question that is running through our minds when we extend invitations is, ‘what benefit could come to me by inviting this person?’ or ‘what is it going to cost me to invite or not invite this person?’

But against the backdrop of our own questions and anxieties about initiations we find today’s gospel text. I have to admit, as I spent this week preparing for this sermon I kept having the children’s song, “Zacchaeus was a wee little man” play through my mind. But the story is about so much more than a wee little man climbing up into a sycamore tree, isn’t it? It’s a story of politics.

Jesus entered a village, the village of Jericho. Let’s stop for a moment. Jericho is in the tribe of Benjamin – the smallest tribe in all of Israel. This tribe is known for getting itself into trouble time and time again in the history of the Hebrew Testament. And here is Jesus, linked to David and the tribe of Judah, the biggest and strongest tribe of the twelve, wondering into Jericho to pass through. We can feel the tension mounting even in the background of the narrative.

So Jesus is passing through town. Surely the news had spread through out town. This man who had been performing miracles in Judah was passing through their town. What excitement it must have created! And there is Zacchaeus, a man small in stature, but large in power. We are told that he is the chief tax collector and he was rich. Well just how did Zacchaeus become so rich? By exploiting his own people. We are told later that he is the son of Abraham, a Jew, yet he was collecting taxes for the Romans, a hefty sum. Then on top of the daunting sum required by the imperial government, Zacchaeus charged even more to take home as his own booty. He became rich off of the backs of his neighbors, and they knew it.

We may never know why Zacchaeus wanted to see Jesus. Was he wanting to see what all of the fuss was about? Had he heard the rumors of what Jesus had done in other towns throughout the region and wanted his own miracle? Whatever his reasoning, Zacchaeus could not have imagined what happened next. Jesus came by the tree he had climbed in order to just catch a glimpse of this rumored Messiah passing by, and Jesus stopped. He looked up into the tree and said, “Zacchaeus, you better get out of that tree because I must stay at your house today.”

Let that sink in. Jesus passed by. Stopped. And called out this person whom he did not personally know by name. And he offered him the irrefutable invitation – “I must stay at your house today.”

If I were Zacchaeus, I would be in shock. Here is this man, from the powerful territory who had been traveling doing amazing things telling him, by name, that he must stay at my house today. How do you even prepare to host Jesus in your home?

So the tax collector shimmies down the tree and hurried away, joyfully, to welcome Jesus.

But his neighbors couldn't have that. They started to grumble to the point where the narrator feels that we must be told about it, that Jesus was going to eat in the house of this "sinner." Can't you just hear the clamor? "Why him?" "He's not worth it" "I cook better" "Who goes and stays with him?!?"

The story goes on, but I want to dwell here for the purpose of this sermon today. Who can you identify with in this story? Are you Jesus, offering someone an invitation to stay in their home? The home and the table were two of the most important places in Jewish culture. To open up one's home and share one's food was sign of respect and hospitality. And here is Jesus, not really being invited to Zacchaeus' house, but inviting himself. Today we would call this rude. Unless it is someone whom we know, whom we love. Jesus is inviting himself into someone's home in the same way we do today with those most dear to us. Those friends whom we know we can stay with if the weather gets bad or if we are in town. An open invitation for intimacy. Are you Jesus, greeting a stranger like a friend?

Or are you Zaachaeus, the one whom no one would ever invite to parties? The person left by themselves in the corner because of how they had treated people in the past. You may not quite be able to remember what came first, exploiting people, or feeling exploited, all you know is that they are linked hand in hand. And now you're so deep in a life that hurts other people that you don't know how to stop. And there is no one there to lift you out of your own depravity. Until today. With this person who came by, treated you as worthy, and gave you a glimpse of hope at restoring your humanity.

Maybe, you don't identify yourself with Jesus or Zaachaeus, but with the crowds. Quick to label another a sinner, but slow to realize the sin that chokes out the life in your own heart. How we love this today. We replace people's names with sins. Instead of John he becomes gay. Instead of Lindsey she is only known as a whore. Instead of Alex he is labeled a murderer. Instead of Maria she becomes a cheater. And instead of Zaachaeus he is known as a tax collector. A sinner.

My biggest fear is that as the church we slip far too easily into being the crowds. We like to label others and lift ourselves up. We want Jesus to eat with us, and get furious when he chooses to go to someone else's, instead of feeling joy for the one Jesus is with in this moment. We want to lock our doors to keep the "sinners" out instead of calling them to us by their name. And if by some miracle they make it through our doors, we block them from ever seeing the light of grace that comes from Christ.

As I was writing this sermon, a memory surfaced from the recesses of my mind. It was a memory that caused the same wave of nausea to sweep over me as when I first experienced it. Do you know where Jericho is today? It is in Palestine. I was in Israel in 2006 with a group of students studying to be pastors and some faculty from a Christian college. We crossed the Israel-Palestine border and the difference was unavoidable. We left the land of wealth and had arrived at the land of devastation. As we arrived at what is now claimed to be "the Zaachaeus tree" and piled off the bus to have pictures taken in front of the tree. And one of the women on the trip started to bribe a little child, who looked like he hadn't ate for days, to be able to take his picture in front of the tree. She gave him a piece of candy. He was starving and wanted more. He tried to

get into her purse for more and she started to wail on him. Followed by the tour guide hitting him and a relative coming over screaming at him. He couldn't be more than seven years old, and instead of feeding him, we were beating him after bribing him. I will never know his name, he just became known to the woman and all of her comrades on the trip as "the little thief".

The story of Zaacheus asks to lay aside our need to label others and to offer them the radical grace of Christ. Or in the words of one of my favorite authors, Shane Claiborne, the scandal of grace. Jesus looked at Zacchaeus, up in that tree and saw simultaneously the child of God he was who had lost his way, and the person whom he could become if only he would be resurrected from his own ashes of a life story. So Jesus offered him an invitation. He offered to come to his home. The ultimate marker of respect and hospitality. He offered to remind Zaacheus that he was not his job, he was not what others labeled him to be, he was simply Zaacheus, son of Abraham. Grace isn't given to those who deserve it, because you can never deserve grace. It is given to those who need it, that is what makes this all so scandalous. Jesus picked Zaacheus. Jesus picked you. Jesus picked me. Jesus picks all of us and tells us that we are much more than the political situations we are trapped in. And salvation comes by accepting the invitation, and saying yes, Lord Jesus, welcome into this place. May we now share in your love and grace. And once we have accepted that invitation, we cannot help but invite others. Amen.