

Homily
Luke 19:1-10

[Preparatory Sundays]

Preparation for the Great Fast begins with Zacchaeus.

And Zacchaeus teaches us about separation and desire.

The basic question for this Sunday is, do we desire God enough to strip away all the distractions, all the clutter and noise in our life that keeps us from hearing His voice.

If we look at the Gospel lesson, before encountering Jesus, we know what Zacchaeus desired: wealth. Perhaps also status, security, and influence.

He cluttered his life in pursuit of these things. You can imagine the interior life of such a person - shallow and focused. Afraid of silence because in silence we cannot hide from our sins. So we clutter and distract. We binge: binge watch, binge drink, binge exercise.

But it all amounts to the same thing: a distracting noise that keeps us from the silence where we might possibly encounter the Divine.

And so the question confronts us: What do we desire? What do we desire as Christians, as parents, as spouses, as students.

What is it that drives us?

We desire control so we respond in anger when challenged.

We desire to "get along" with people, to not "rock the boat" so that we no longer speak out against evil.

We desire worldly success so we value titles and jobs more than family and relationships.

God created us for communion but what we want is freedom, or maybe control, or perhaps pleasure.

Our wayward desires keep us from communion with God.

Zacchaeus is changed today, and we want to know how because we, too, are trapped in desires that drive us away from where we should be.

This morning, something is different for Zacchaeus.

The miracle this morning is that Zacchaeus hears a voice and responds.

And we also want to hear and respond.

St. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus sought to see Jesus and ran before the crowd to find a suitable place to see this man whom he desired.

Maybe we didn't "run" to church this morning as enthusiastically as Zacchaeus ran to see Jesus, but we are here.

Like Zacchaeus, we want to hear our Lord say, "Today, salvation has come to this house, for you also are a son and a daughter of Abraham."

We also want to be in the family of God.

We know we need something, just as Zacchaeus knew.

We need to know how to "see" Jesus?

Zacchaeus, St. Luke tells us, was vertically challenged; he was short. Not only was he short on height, he was short on virtue and godliness as well.

So how did Zacchaeus managed to see Jesus?

Behold the tree.

This is true for us also: There is no way to see Jesus, no access to our Lord, no communion with Christ apart from the tree.

The tree transforms our desires because upon the wood of the tree our selfish desires are crucified.

This morning, Zacchaeus encounters the cross.

He climbs up the tree - the only place where we are able to see Jesus and hear His voice - and when Zacchaeus comes down, he is a new creation.

His desires are transformed.

Instead of being oriented inward, serving the self, after encountering the cross, Zacchaeus has but one desire: to know this man who stands before him.

Do we desire Jesus enough to face the Cross? To submit all the parts of our life to the Cross?

The cross clears the heart of clutter and cleans the window to our soul.

The cross removes the obstacles, the distractions, in our life that keep us from encountering Jesus.

And so as we prepare to embark upon the journey of the holy Forty Days, we must ask for this desire and the strength to encounter the Cross.

Why does the Cross have this power?

Because the Cross shows us what it means to be God. God has chosen the one thing all human beings share, the one experience we will all undergo, the one event that unites all of us and that we cannot avoid - death.

Jesus shows us what it means to be God in the way he dies.

Desiring Communion with all people, our God has revealed Himself in a way that all of us can participate in - our own death.

So to be ready for that awesome and dreadful event, whenever it may come, we must habituated ourselves to death by putting to death our selfishness and the illusion of control. By reminding ourselves that we do not contain life within our self. We do not sustain our selves.

This is facing the Cross. Embracing our weakness as creatures.

St. Paul tells us that Jesus Christ is the image of the invisible God and that in Jesus all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Col 1).

In this image we have been made. And as disciples of this God, we show our discipleship in the same way. Our death.

We learn to lay down our life in many different ways, often quite simple and basic ways:

Prayer, fasting, almsgiving. Being a healing presence to others.

Kind words. Lovingly holding each other accountable as a community of disciples of Christ.

Preparing for communion by attending Vespers. And by prayer, fasting, and recent confession.

When we accept our own personal struggles as God's will for us and for our salvation. And when we resolve to fight sin, tooth and nail.

When we strive to see people for who they are created to be: creatures made in God's image, loved by their creator. Instead of the foolish thing they are currently doing. And we hope they are trying to do the same for us.

The cross teaches us how to do this because even the King of kings did not refuse humiliation; he was not afraid to appear weak. He was not afraid to face His cross, the Cross.

Not afraid because love casts out fear. And God is love.

Like Zacchaeus, do we desire the cross? Do we desire to see and hear Jesus?

Not all the time.

But we are here this morning and we know there are parts of our lives, pieces of our heart not surrendered to Christ.

We have desires that are contrary to the Gospel. Contrary to love.

So, this morning we ask God to crucify those desires. To take them from us, so that we can see him and hear his voice.

As we together pray the liturgy this morning, the wonderful prayers of thanksgiving, we remember that this is not just the prayer of the liturgy but the prayer of our life.

Each day, each encounter, is to be an offering made in thanksgiving to God.

This morning from Zacchaeus we learn that to desire the One in whose image we have been made is to encounter the cross.

So, as we make our preparations to undergo the Great Fast, let us not forget that it is through the cross that joy has come into all the world.

The joy of knowing God and being known by Him.

The joy of communion with Brothers and Sisters in Christ.

The joy of being free from the weight of sin and death.

In joy let us approach the throne of grace - being confident that Jesus Christ, and He alone, makes us worthy to receive.