

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

A couple invited some people for dinner. At the table, the wife turned to their six-year-old daughter and said, "Would you like to say the blessing?" "I wouldn't know what to say," the girl replied. "Just say what you hear Mommy say," the wife answered. The daughter bowed her head and said, "Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner?"

Dear Friends,

We are all known for instant things like instant coffee, instant results, instant remedy, insta-pot, instant messaging etc. This all makes us get faster results. In our busy world, we don't have time for any slow things. Today's reading helps us to think of our instant changes, and challenges, in our faith when we meet Jesus in our midst.

The gospel points out that, before his conversion, Zacchaeus was a short man, someone lacking in height, but that, after his conversion, the tall man gave back what the small man had stolen. Meeting Jesus, it seems, made Zacchaeus grow bigger in stature.

That's what goodness does to us, it makes us grow taller. For example, a friend of mine shares this story: He has a neighbor who frequently drops around to drink coffee and chat. The neighbor is a good man from a wonderful family and has been blessed with lots of love and good example in his life. But, like the rest of us, he has his weaknesses, in his case, gossip and occasional pettiness. One day, as he was sitting with my friend, he made a very racist remark. My friend, instead of accusing him of being a racist or shaming him with the inappropriateness of his remark, called him instead to his own essential goodness: "That comment surprises me," he said, "coming from you. I've always considered you and your family big-hearted people, with class, never petty. I've always envied your family for its goodness and understanding. That remark simply doesn't sound like you!"

The man's reaction was instant, positive. Immediately he apologized: "You're right," he said, "I don't know why I sometimes say stupid things like that"! Like Zacchaeus the taller man gave back what the smaller man had taken.

We all have two souls, two hearts and minds within us. one or other pops in and out now and then in our daily life. Goodness helps us grow taller than hurts and insults. Our days are divided up between those moments when we are big-hearted, generous, warm, hospitable, unafraid, wanting to embrace everyone; and those moments when we are petty, selfish, over-aware of the unfairness of life, frightened, and seeking only to protect ourselves and our own safety and interests. Morality is not a command, it's an invitation; not a threat, but a reminder of who we truly are.

What is the reason for Zacchaeus instant conversion? By entering Zacchaeus' house, Jesus gave back to its owner the dignity that he had lost and restored his sense of self-worth. Jesus gave him a new life. By making no demands on Zacchaeus, Jesus gave him a feeling of acceptance and a new direction for his life.

John of the Cross, great spiritual director, counsels someone who comes in with a moral flaw. His first counsel would be: What are you good at? What have you been blessed with? Where, in your life and work, does God's goodness and beauty most shine through?

The Gospel today challenges us to be open and grow in goodness in ourselves, and others. Eucharist is the celebration that grows the goodness in us and others. Gospel means good news. It tells the good news that God has done to us through his Son and is doing to us. It is not just good advice. Let us have an openness in growing with goodness and instant conversion from our petty things in life.