

Ordinary 31C 2013
Climbing the Tree of God's Mercy
Father Frank Matera

For the past several weeks, the liturgy has focused our attention on some rather remarkable people: a persistent widow who badgers a judge until he gives her justice and a tax collector who is more righteous than a law-abiding Pharisee because he acknowledges his sinfulness. In today's gospel, we meet another interesting character: a short man, whom everybody knows as a sinner because he is tax collector—someone who has extorted money from his own people by collaborating with the Romans. But it is this man with whom Jesus chooses to lodge. It is this man whom Jesus calls a true descendant of Abraham. It is this man to whom Jesus brings salvation.

When the people of Jericho complain that Jesus is staying in the house of a notorious sinner, Jesus' response is simple and direct: he has come to seek and to save the lost. He has come not to seek those who are already doing God's will; he has come to find and save sinners. He has come to bring salvation to those who have lost their way.

In seeking out the lost and those who have gone astray, Jesus becomes a living example of the words in today's first reading from the Book of Wisdom, which says of God:

For you love all things that are, and you loathe nothing that you have made; for what you hated you would not fashion ... But you spare all things, because they are yours, O Lord and lover of souls.

How could God not love the sinner whom he has called into existence? How could God abandon the creature whom He has destined for eternal life? How could Jesus not lodge with Zacchaeus, the one man in Jericho who most needed his mercy and forgiveness.

Zacchaeus must have known his need to be forgiven. Otherwise, why did he climb the tree? To be sure he climbed the tree to see Jesus, but he also climbed the tree to be seen by Jesus; he wanted Jesus to know that he was there. He wanted Jesus to see him because he knew and understood his profound need for God's mercy. And so, instead of hiding in the crowd or staying in his home, he climbed a tree so that the Lord of all mercy, the very Son of God, might see and forgive him.

Sometimes we are more like the crowd than we are like Jesus. We are quick to categorize certain kinds of people as sinners, especially people whom we dislike or do not understand as sinners. We are indignant when they ask for mercy in such a bold way. We are even offended that God is so ready to embrace and forgive them. But there are other times that we are more like Jesus than the crowd because we understand that God does not seek to destroy anyone, not even the sinner. God's will for us is our salvation. God seeks out those who have sinned so that they will repent and enjoy eternal life.

The way in which Jesus approaches sinners is the perfect model for the church today, the perfect model for our parish community. By the mercy that Jesus extends to Zacchaeus, Jesus

shows us the way to welcome sinner and grow our community, He shows us how to extend God's forgiveness to all in need. If we imitate the example of Jesus, we will become a community that forgives and welcomes others, a community where even sinners will find a welcome, a community that extends God's love to the world. And by becoming a community that extends God's mercy to the world, we will not only grow in numbers, more importantly, we will be a sign of God's mercy to the world.