

# October 30, 2022: Sunday Sermon

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As a member of the Bishop's staff and this parish, it's good to be with you this morning.

I would like to start by saying something about this unusual time in our church life. As usual, we are preparing for the annual Diocesan Convention next month where we will be holding elections for various diocesan offices in a few weeks, in addition to approving the diocesan budget. AND, if you haven't heard, there will be an election for a new Bishop for the first time since 2003.

The Search Committee nominated three very strong candidates, and this past week, they were here in Ohio, answering questions and meeting many communicants at "meet and greet" sessions throughout the diocese—all in preparation for the election on the afternoon of November 19. All clergy in the diocese and 3 delegates from each parish will participate. For lay delegates to be eligible to vote, that parish must be in compliance with all canonical mandates (such as making timely pension payments on behalf of lay and clergy employees, an annual audit, submitting parochial reports, paying assessments to the diocese.)

Unlike elections for the other offices, it will take a majority of lay and clergy delegates voting separately on the same ballot to elect the Bishop Coadjutor, who will serve alongside Bishop Hollingsworth until his retirement next year, and then she will become his successor. I encourage you to watch the candidate videos, the recorded meet and greet sessions from last week, and talk to the clergy and delegates about your impressions. The St. Paul's delegates are senior warden Sam Hartwell, junior warden Dave Banyard, and Diane Banyard. They are casting votes as your representatives.

After the election, the Standing Committees in a majority of the 112 dioceses in The Episcopal Church must formally consent before the new bishop can serve. To assist in this whole process, the Standing Committee appointed a Transition Committee, chaired by Jessie Dodson, has been coordinating the many events (including last week's meet and greets) that will culminate with the consecration of the Bishop Coadjutor on April 29 next year.

One of my favorite greeting cards shows a man in front of an open refrigerator that is filled with nothing but sticks of butter. The inside of the card reads: "Honey, where's the butter?" I admit (and my family will tell me) that I do not always see what is right in front of me. One of the recurring themes in the Gospel of Luke is the focus on (or seeing) the poor and needy, and the parables of Jesus to focus our attention on them.

In the past few weeks, for example, we have heard in the Gospel readings the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, in which the beggar Lazarus sits outside the gate at the Rich Man's house, but the Rich Man ignores him.

We also heard about Jesus healing the ten lepers, whom no one else sees.

In these readings, Jesus identifies the “other” as the poor and sick who are worthy to be seen. Focusing on those who need our help is part of fulfilling the great commandment to love each other. Jesus also chides those who are rich—such as in the parable of the dishonest manager who reduces the Owner’s debts so that the borrowers will be favorable to him when the Owner fires him after cheating: you cannot serve God and wealth.

Today’s Gospel is different. We know that Zaccheus is the chief tax collector in Jericho (and he is not poor and he is not sick). He is “rich” because he has likely skimmed off some of the tax collections for his own benefit and lined his own pockets. As my Bishop’s staff colleague, Rev. Percy Grant observed, he was a Jew who worked for the Romans and so was disliked by both the people of Jericho AND the Romans—he was ostracized because he wasn’t part of the Jericho community and he was doing the dirty work on behalf of the Roman occupiers. In other words, he was in an in-between place—a different kind of outcast.

So why did Zaccheus climb the tree? The Gospel tells us “he was trying to see who Jesus was” because he was short of stature. But like the man looking at the butter, note that we don’t read that Zaccheus sees Jesus; it is Jesus who sees him, calls him by name, and invites himself to his house.

Zaccheus hurries down from the tree and “was happy to welcome” Jesus. But the crowd grumbles, probably saying “what?”, why is Jesus paying attention to this man who has gotten rich off of us? Why does Jesus want to go to *his* house—he is a sinner!

Similar to the lepers and Lazarus, Zaccheus was an outsider. But Jesus sought him out, just like Jesus sees the “other” -- the marginalized to whom he draws our attention throughout his ministry.

In the face of the grumbling crowd, Zaccheus “stood there” and said “Look, half of all that I have I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” The lawyer in me says he used the word “IF” I have defrauded anyone, I’ll give back 4 times as much. Was he hedging on his repentance?

Regardless, Jesus rewards Zaccheus and declares that “salvation has come to this house because he, too, is a son of Abraham.” – a part of the family. Even though Zaccheus wasn’t poor and he wasn’t sick, or blind, Jesus still sought him out and declared him to be a son of Abraham. According to Luther Seminary Professors Matt Skinner and Karoline Lewis, we all deserve to be seen by God whether we’re down on our luck, sick with an illness, consumed by greed, or just trying to make it through the day.

Not only did Jesus see Zaccheus, but he also said let’s have dinner. I wonder about their dinner conversation. Perhaps it would have been Jesus saying, “Those are nice words about giving

back, Zaccheus, but it's time do something about it -- real action." Jesus might have even quoted from today's reading from Isaiah:

*"Cease to do evil, learn to do good, seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow. Come now, let us argue it out, says the Lord."*

I also imagine that this would have been a difficult conversation as Jesus would have challenged Zaccheus to do more than just declare his repentance, and even told him he couldn't hedge on his promise to return 4 times his ill-gotten gains.

So, it might not be that easy to tie up this story and this homily by saying Jesus helped transform Zaccheus. That would be like saying that Zaccheus had an Ebenezer Scrooge-type conversion after having been visited by the ghosts of Christmas past, present, and future. We know better -- there aren't such easy or quick answers.

But the story does tell us that Jesus treated Zaccheus with respect. Even as someone who's done bad things and who's on the outside looking in, God saw him and wanted to include him—no exceptions.

So, even if we don't see the butter the person right in front of us who may need our help, God does see us, invites us out of the tree and into conversation, and into community with each other. Amen.