

*“Jesus Came for the Lost!”*

**Today is the first Sunday during our Consecrating Stewards Program.** In addition to the Youth Class providing Worship Leadership for today, they and two of our Young Adults will be presenting a Stewardship Skit as our First Witnessing Steward Testimony for the Consecrating Stewards Program. Our Consecrating Stewards Program is very different from the typical Stewardship Program of most local congregations. For example, our Consecrating Stewards Program focuses on enabling us to grow or deepen our Faith Relationship with our Divine Parent. Instead of begging members and friends to give more, so the church receives the money it needs to pay for its Budget, our emphasis is on growing our personal Faith Relationship with God by committing more of ourselves and resources – including our money to our Creator’s Purposes. **This approach is our natural response to the many expressions of God’s Agape – Self-Giving and Sacrificial Love for us and all people.** Of course, the most powerful example of how the Almighty has shown us this Agape Love was revealed in the Public Ministry, Life, Death, and Resurrection of God’s Only Son, Jesus Christ. Our Scripture for today provides a very good example of how the experiencing of our Divine Parent’s Agape Love naturally leads us to be transformed – dramatically changed. We come into a closer New Faith Relationship with Our Maker, which grows and deepens, as we commit more of ourselves and our money and other resources to fulfilling the Almighty’s Will and our calling to be people, who belong to Jesus Christ and God.

The interaction between Jesus and Zacchaeus in our Reading shows one specific example of how this process, which I just described, proceeds. So, let’s examine our Scripture to discover how it lifts up the way our New Faith Relationship is brought about and strengthened. Luke began the Reading by reporting Jesus was on a journey and made a stop in Jericho. We learn in **verse 2**, *“There was a chief tax collector there named Zacchaeus, who was rich.”* So, we are more fully able to understand the dramatic nature of Zacchaeus’ transformation, which occurs in the later part of this Text, let’s look closer at what we were told about Zacchaeus in that verse. Saying he was a “chief tax collector” did not mean he was looked at in the same way employees of the Internal Revenue Service are today. Instead, Zacchaeus’ job would be seen more like the way we would look at a Tax Collector, who worked for the Russian government, after the United States found itself occupied by that foreign power. He was extremely unpopular! What made the situation even more conflicted was Zacchaeus was obviously very rich, as a result of his position of authority for the Roman Empire. **Yes, he was also shorter than the average person but it was his working for the foreign occupiers and his ill-gotten wealth, which led to him being considered an outcast and a “sinner”.**

After Zacchaeus was in the sycamore tree, so he could see Jesus, something rather remarkable and extraordinary took place! Luke reported in **verse 5**, *“When Jesus came to that place, he looked up and said to Zacchaeus, ‘Hurry down, Zacchaeus, because I must stay in your house today.’”* Jesus obviously knew who Zacchaeus was because he called him by name. Nevertheless, Jesus went against the norms of his society and invited himself to visit Zacchaeus and his home! What was Jesus doing?

Luke informed us of Zacchaeus’ joy and speediness at welcoming Jesus. Then, the gospel author revealed in **verse 7**, *“All the people who saw it started grumbling, ‘This man has gone as a guest*

*to the home of a sinner!’”* Jesus invited himself to the home of a sinner? You can bet his disciples were astounded! So, again, what was Jesus doing?

Well, he was turning upside down the world of the Jews! The predominant religious views of Jewish society during Jesus’ public ministry were aligned with the legalists, such as the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law. They argued God only loves those, who radically obey the laws, which they claimed the Almighty had commanded everyone to follow. **Jesus frequently confronted the legalists and demonstrated the Divine Parent Agape Loves all people (pause) by healing them, eating with them, and welcoming them.** In case someone wanted to deny that truth in connection with how Jesus and Zacchaeus interacted, after the Tax Collector made his dramatic announcement in response to the way Jesus showed him God’s Agape Love, the Scripture stated in **verses 9 - 10, “Jesus said to him, ‘Salvation has come to this house today, for this man, also, is a descendant of Abraham. The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.’”** “Salvation has come”, he “is a descendant of Abraham” – the Father of Faith, and Jesus “came to seek and to save the lost” all those statements indicate God’s Son interacted with Zacchaeus to intentionally invite – prompt Zacchaeus’ transformation – salvation!

So, let’s recap. Our Divine Parent sent Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to reveal to all people God’s Agape – Self-Giving and Suffering Love, so we will be reconciled with God and one another in the New Faith Relationship. Jesus did that by inviting the Roman Tax Collector – Zacchaeus to welcome him into his home that very day! The crowd was astounded by such a display of agape love and radical and extravagant hospitality when they expected a man of God to reject Zacchaeus!

Now, we come to how Zacchaeus responded to Jesus’ acceptance of him – God’s Agape Love for him, as well as, the ridicule and verbal abuse he received from the crowd. **In verse 8, “Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, ‘Listen, sir! I will give half my belongings to the poor, and if I have cheated anyone, I will pay back four times as much.’”** Zacchaeus did not merely declare he believed Jesus to be the Messiah – the Son of Man – Son of God. Instead, the Tax Collector for the Romans – the enemy committed himself to a radical change for his life! **Yes, Zacchaeus illustrated the truth of our Consecrating Stewards Program!** We grow in our New Faith Relationship with God and one another as we commit more of our lives and resources to God’s Purposes!

During these next few weeks, leading up to our Consecration and Thanksgiving Sunday on November 13th, we continue to celebrate how our Divine Parent sent the Son, Jesus Christ, to reveal God’s Agape Love – our Maker’s Invitation to be received into the New Faith Relationship, even though we certainly do not deserve such Grace. **While going through this process of celebrating God’s Agape Love, let’s also be reminded and inspired by Zacchaeus’ example of Radical Transformation and Commitment.** Amen.