

# Sermons at Saint Paul's

*A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name*

Pentecost 24

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We all have mirrors in our bathrooms, bedrooms and some women even have them in their wallets. Mirrors open a window into what we want to see, and if we do not like what we see, we immediately fix it. The idea of a mirror reminds me of Marguerite Porete a French beguine who authored *The Mirror of Simple Souls*. In the book, Marguerite writes, "...and this Soul does only what it is God's work to do. She does not care about herself. She cares about God, who loves her more than this Soul could love herself. This Soul has so great a faith in God that she has no fear of being poor, as long as her Lover is rich. For Faith teaches her that as much as she hopes in God, so she will find Him...." The human soul, according to Porete pursues only that which God wants the soul to do, and because the soul has an enormous faith in God's richness, there is no anxiety of ever getting poor. The main drive for the soul is not herself, but the other-the one who in all cases is a representation of God. This soul lives with the assurance that a continual hope in God would ultimately culminate in seeing God.

Such is our desire; such is the human desire, and especially the desire of a man who was a sinner. A man who had aligned himself with the Roman Empire, and by that amassed so much wealth through deceptive means. Everyone knew he was a sinner-because he was a tax collector. And he himself was aware of his own sinfulness-because he was a tax collector. If the burden and heaviness of his sins weighed heavily on him, the weight also prevented him from seeing the Jesus who was passing through his city. He wanted to see Jesus. And a lot more people wanted to see the Jesus who was passing through Jericho. But in order not to get lost in the crowd because of his height, and the weight of his sins, he ran ahead of everyone else to climb a sycamore tree so he could catch a glimpse of the approaching salvation.

You know, the mirror, as it were, helps us to take a second look at ourselves. And mainly because of the way we want to appear, at least as beautiful or presentable, we work on ourselves with the mirror as our aid until we are satisfied with ourselves. Zacchaeus held a mirror to his face. And in that mirror, he saw a broken man, he saw a man who had all that he could possibly possess, but who knew he possessed nothing. Zacchaeus saw a man who was like a cup filled so much to the brim that there was no space for the other, but who also knew he was empty.

For some reason he realized that salvation can come to him-that in spite of all else, if only he could lose himself, he could possibly find himself again. C. S. Lewis wrote in *Mere Christianity* that “The real test of being in the presence of God is that you either forget about yourself altogether, or see yourself as a small, dirty object.” Zacchaeus wasn’t far from seeing himself as one who was undeserving; he knew he wasn’t really free until he was free from his ego, free from his reputation, free from his self-image or his need to be loving or being loved by others. He moved himself to the place of nothingness, to the place of self-forgetfulness-the spiritual threshold where we lose everything. But interestingly, that is the place of abundance. The place of our nothingness in God, is the very same place of our abundance in God because that is where human fulfillment resides.

By climbing a tree, and waiting patiently on Jesus to walk on by, Zacchaeus never thought Jesus would see him, much more recognize him, call him by his name and invite to come down from the tree. If religion is about a distinction between the pure and impure, the good and the bad; then please understand that Jesus is not about religion. Rather, Jesus finds God among the impure, Jesus finds God among the despised, Jesus finds God among the bad, and even entertains the tax collector instead of comforting those like the Pharisee who think they are not lost. Those are the people who grumbled at Jesus’ interaction with Zacchaeus, because they hardly hold the mirror to their faces.

The prophet Isaiah doesn’t fill our ears with just the news of our sins, and the extent to which God despises our empty sacrifices, festivals and worship- those that offers a false sense of hope. The prophet actually opens the door for a new conversation with the God who forgives our sins and turns our lives upside right. If Zacchaeus felt that he had to climb a tree in order to see the Jesus who was passing by, he came to realize that he could not hide from the One who seeks out the lost. The foundation of the palpable joy in Zacchaeus, is the affirmation that comes with knowing that you have been found. That in spite of the burden of sin, the person whom he longed to see, even from a distance, actually intended to spend time with him in his house.

Now, if I may ask, which is greater, our sin, our failure or God's love? Zacchaeus, came upon the realization that what mattered was not the depth of his sin, but the depth of acceptance from Jesus.

The Psalmist not only imputes happiness to those who find forgiveness, but we can understand the joy of Zacchaeus, when we realize that God's sole activity-without any condition whatsoever, is to seek and find the lost; because those who are lost, wherever they are and for whatever reason, are also children of Abraham and therefore belong to God. God rejoices when those whom God created rejoice over God's grace-it is a kind of mutual sharing of joy with God and others. I learned that joy precedes faith, and the new reality of Zacchaeus was one in which he found himself in a sacred space-the space where real transformation happens. It is the sacred space where we let go of our old world and embrace a new world. It is a world in which Zacchaeus can overflow with joy to the extent that he immediately expressed his willingness to give half of his wealth to the poor and pay back all those he had defrauded over the years. I guess his question to himself was, what is the point of holding on to all my wealth if I now know what it means to be rich? Like Porete said, those who are rich in God have no fear of being poor.

Today, salvation has come to your house. Jesus said. Not because Zacchaeus was suddenly a righteous man who had memorized the Torah, but because he articulated a new found freedom steeped in joy-the joy of being found. The kind of joy which asks not what my needs are, but what are my gifts. Which gifts do I possess and so want to share with this community of faith? It is that kind of joy which celebrates its freedom in God but is equally aware of its dependence on God. This reminds me of the "Memorial" by Blaise Pascal, a 17th century French Mathematician and Philosopher. "Memorial" was found sewn into his coat when he died. He writes:

This year of grace,

Monday 23rd November...

From about half past ten in the evening until half past midnight:

FIRE.

GOD of Abraham, GOD of Isaac, GOD of Jacob,

not of philosophers and scholars.

CERTAINTY, heartfelt, JOY, JOY, God of Jesus Christ,

Thy God is my God...

Joy, joy, joy, tears of joy.

I have cut myself off from him.

My God why hast thou forsaken me?

Let me never be cut off from him.

But this is eternal life, that they may know thee who alone art true God,  
and him whom thou hast sent, Jesus Christ.

I have cut myself off from him, I have fled from him...

Let me never be cut off from him.

He can only be kept by the ways taught in the Gospel...

Everlasting joy in return for one day's effort on earth.

I must admit that I also find it excruciatingly painful holding the mirror to my face. But I endeavor to do so because I know that salvation is not a one-time event but a continual process to which I must apply myself. My joy is not in what I find amiss, my joy rests on the idea that I have been found, and so should be your joy. Irenaeus once wrote that the glory of God is a human who is fully alive; not one who is alive in the self but one who is alive in God. Being alive in God means that such a person is aware that he or she was not only sought by God, but was found by God.

Amen.