

About twenty-five years ago when I was teaching at Wahlert Catholic High School in Dubuque, an all school assembly was held at which the speaker, whose name I cannot recall, told her personal story of conversion. At one time this woman owned a chain of abortion clinics in the Dallas/Fort Worth, Texas area. She was the largest provider of abortion and abortion related services in the area. As such, she was very rich. She moved into one of the nicer Dallas neighborhoods. Her next door neighbors were devout Christians. They were well aware of who she was, and what she did for a living. While stating their opposition to her pro-choice values and abortion providing services, yet they never snubbed her and in any dealings with her were civil and very charitable. They sent her Christmas cards and, at times, invited her to join them for a backyard barbecue, but in neither instance used these occasions to proselytize or argue the issue of abortion. Over time this caused a change to gradually take hold in this woman, eventually leading to her Christian conversion and the abandonment of her abortion clinics and going around the country to tell her story and the truth about abortion.

As a child this woman had grown up in a home where she experienced verbal and physical abuse. As a teenager she was raped, became pregnant and aborted the pre-born fetus. In her anger and pain she decided that no woman should have to endure what she had and so, saw offering, what to her represented a way out of a cycle of violence and abuse. Abortion and other counseling services was a way to freedom and liberation to women.

This true story, for me, is a contemporary example of the encounter between Jesus, Zacchaeus, and the Scribes and Pharisees in today's famous gospel story. St. Luke tells us that Zacchaeus was a man "short in stature." This is not only a detail of his physical appearance, but more importantly, his moral state. Yet Zacchaeus, like many in our culture and world, was curious to see Jesus. Jesus, was familiar with people like Zacchaeus. Notice how Jesus reacts to him: he does not moralize or sermonize. Instead he invites himself to Zacchaeus' house for dinner!!! He opens the home of his heart to Zacchaeus even as he invites himself physically into Zacchaeus' home. As I've mentioned

before, in St. Luke's gospel the primary teaching and experience of the person of Jesus takes place at the dinner table. In these meal encounters, Jesus instructs us on the nature and meaning of the Holy Eucharist as well as what it means to be his church. Jesus teaches us that encountering him does not depend upon goodness of life, but encountering him can bring conversion of life. All people, sinners included, are *invited* to salvation. Zacchaeus undergoes dramatic change after seeing Jesus. He is the last person St. Luke's gospel mentions before Jesus enters Jerusalem. It is as though St. Luke saves the worst for last in order to make his point: "the Son of Man has come to seek out and save what was lost." If even for sinners like Zacchaeus or the woman from Texas "salvation has come", then who could ever be excluded? There *is* hope for us all!!!

These stories also teach us that now *we* must be the body of Christ, the living presence of Jesus through the Holy Spirit in the world today. Do we exhibit in thought and action the open heart of Jesus to every human being? As a culture and, sadly more and more in some quarters of the church, I fear today we are becoming, or already have become, "small in stature" through words and deeds that are very uncivil and bitterly partisan. While not as outright bigoted and closed minded as Pastor Fred Phelps and his Westboro Baptist Church in Topeka, Kansas, I periodically encounter even in the Catholic community attitudes and words of condemnation and judgment accompanied by a palatable glee of self-righteousness in calling out sinners and calling down the wrath of God on "those people" all the while smugly holding to an individual or group's own supposed superior moral or theological righteousness and presumed orthodoxy regarding church teaching and pastoral practice.

The author of Wisdom reminds us today that God has mercy on all, overlooking peoples sins in the hope of repentance, no matter how long the process may take, loathing nothing of what he has created. Jesus and the neighbors of the woman in Texas model such divine mercy and forbearance. Their lives challenge us all.