

Zacchaeus stood barely five feet tall with his shoes off and was the least popular man in Jericho. He was head tax-collector for Rome in the district and had made such a killing out of it that he was the richest man in town. The crowd “grumbles” when Jesus invites himself to dinner at the home of a “sinner.”

Some see a hidden sting in the story: *if* I have defrauded any one of anything I will restore it fourfold. “If!” That Zacchaeus is despised by the crowd is not in doubt. But nowhere in the story does it say that he was a thief. He is simply hated for what he does. What he does is sanctioned by Roman law.

What then does Jesus action signify? Jesus doesn’t pander to the crowd to gain their adulation; he refuses to side with their base prejudices. Zacchaeus is affirmed for who he is. He does not repent, contrary to how the story is usually read: he has no need to.

Rather, a person who is despised is allowed to flourish. He has, after all, given away half of what he has. Consistently, Jesus sides with the ostracized, the rejected, the unclean, the impure, the (alleged) sinner, and the half-breeds.

Even before the palm branches are stripped from the trees, and the cries of ‘Blessed!’ are heard, Jesus is a disturber of crowds. He does not want their praise: he wants their commitment. And they will make him pay for his failure to deliver what they promised themselves.

Nonnus, a 5th century Egyptian monk, who became a bishop in Syria, attended a gathering of bishops in Antioch. He scandalized the other bishops by daring to thank God for the beauty of a notorious courtesan who rode naked through the city. The others looked away as she passed by wearing nothing but jewelry.

Nonnus asked, “Did not her great beauty delight you? Truly, it delighted me.” Then he chastised his fellow bishops, commenting that he only wished he had the desire to please God that she had to please men.

As the story goes, the courtesan heard of the monk’s remark and came to him in disguise, seeking to change her life. She became a nun and the church acquired a new saint, Pelagia of Antioch. Her feast day is October 8; Nonnus’ feast day is November 10.

The crowd sees Zacchaeus as a traitor. He sold his allegiance to Rome. The crowd sees Zacchaeus as an extortioner, collecting taxes to support the Roman occupation of Palestine and, by adding a commission, perfectly legal under Roman law, enriching himself. The

crowd sees Zacchaeus as a sinner, trading the tradition of Abraham and Sarah for the security of empire.

Zacchaeus is up a tree, out on a limb, trying to see Jesus—we don't know why—and Jesus sees him. The first step in the process of salvation is to be seen in a way that recognizes one's humanity, one's dignity as a human being.

Jesus calls Zacchaeus by name. He is not only seen; he is known. "The deepest craving of every human heart is to be laid bare, to be known, to be understood" writes Elizabeth O'Connor. "If ever we take the time to know another life, we will be experienced as godly."

Zacchaeus is seen and known and Jesus invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus' house. In first century Palestine, entering into a person's house, sitting at table and sharing a meal, signified acceptance of the host. Zacchaeus is seen, known, accepted.

Zacchaeus, overwhelmed, declares "Half my possessions I will give to the poor; and *if* I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much." Jesus declares "TODAY salvation has come to this house, because Zacchaeus too is a son of Abraham."

Salvation happens when Zacchaeus comes to see himself as Jesus sees him: a son of Abraham. Abraham is known as the patron saint of hospitality. Abraham offered hospitality to three strangers, mysterious visitors, who in turn promised that within a year Abraham and Sarah, childless into old age, would have a son.

Hospitality is the means of salvation. Salvation is seeing our original face, our divinity, which allows us to live the fullness of our humanity. Humanity is both human and divine; there is no humanity without divinity. Saints help us see the innate sacredness within all creation, help us see that we too are daughters and sons of Abraham and Sarah.