

**Sermon:** Be loving as God is loving.. to yourself!

Readings: Luke 10:25-28 and Luke 19: 1-10

The title or theme of today's service is Be loving as God is loving to yourself! This may sound strange to you, after all aren't we Christians always supposed to put God and others first? And doesn't loving yourself lead to selfishness?

When I was in high school about a hundred years ago, we had a slang term for somebody who thought they were better than everyone else, we used to call them a 'Lovo', 'ya lovo' would we say to the kid who liked to show off. With hindsight and maturity I can see now that calling another kid names, either to their face or behind their back acted as a defence against my own lack of self-worth and self-love. Many of us may remember our school years as a sometimes-fierce battleground, a place where we were beginning to assess our self-worth and the value of our existence. Heavy stuff to deal with along with pimples, school work and body changes that no one can really ever prepare you for.

Fortunately the gift of growing older teaches us to accept ourselves. However for believers there is a better way, a shortcut, and a sure foundation on which to base our 'sense of self' and that of course is to be found in Jesus Christ. In a moment we are going to immerse ourselves in the story of Jesus and Zacchaeus to uncover one of the foundations of self-love but first I would like to share with you an important lesson I learnt at college about today's other gospel reading.

At a time in college when I was doubting myself, wondering if I was good enough to be a minister, wondering what on earth I was doing there with all those talented, confident, funny smart people I heard this, 'Love your neighbour as yourself works both ways, it works in reverse; we must also love ourselves as we love others'. We Christians can be so focused on trying to love others that we forget the origins of Love, we forget that to love others we must first be full to the brim with God's love. We must constantly be open to receiving God's love in order to give God's love away. The more we understand ourselves as God's beloved ones, the less upset we will become at the rudeness of a sales clerk, the idiocy of poor drivers, the person who makes a snide remark to us (intended or imagined), and most importantly, we can come to accept our own mistakes and failures, our idiosyncrasies, our weirdness.

So with all that in mind let's go into today's story using the ancient Christian practice of lectio divina. Don't be scared, all this means is that I will be inviting you all to listen to the story in a meditative, reflective way. Now, in a time of lectio divina we usually allow the Holy Spirit to guide us to a word, a phrase or an image that speaks to us, however today I have one question to pose before we begin, "what does this story tell us about our own worth and value?"

If you feel comfortable you may like to close your eyes as we imagine ourselves right there in Jericho as Jesus passes by.

You have left whatever it is you were doing. Buying bread for your master, carrying a letter, buying food for the night time meal and you join the crowd, wondering what is going on.

Imagine the streetscape, the heat, the dust, the trees that line the street.

You hear that Jesus is coming into town. Do you come to catch a glimpse of Jesus out of curiosity? Have you come to see a miracle? What is the mood of the crowd gathered around you? Is there a sense of expectation?

You look at the people around you and notice that horrible man Zacchaeus. Do you mumble to yourself about him? Do you sneer as you watch him try to peep over the shoulders of the onlookers? Do you consider making space for him?

Who is God calling you to make space for in your day-to-day life?

You notice Zacchaeus start to run ahead of the crowd.

Just then Jesus walks by you. Are you drawn to him or does he seem very ordinary? Are you disappointed? Do you wonder what all the fuss is about? Will you go back to your everyday life unchanged or will you seek him out, wanting to know more?

Then you notice Jesus stopping. He looks up into one of the sycamore trees, and in its branches is that pathetic little man, the outcast Zacchaeus.

Who do you call names, judge, and discriminate against in your day-to-day life?

Jesus speaks to Zacchaeus, "Hurry down, Zacchaeus, I must stay in your house today?"

Do you gasp and murmur like the crowd? Why would Jesus want to go to Zacchaeus' house? Doesn't he know that man is a sinner? Are you jealous that Zacchaeus gets all the attention? Are you outraged? How would you feel if Jesus stopped, looked at you, called you by name and said let me in?

Drift back to the present...

Today's simple little story about a nobody who Jesus stopped to look at is a story that can literally change lives, just as it did for Zacchaeus and his household. I hope you have heard a word or phrase or felt something that you can now carry with you both to reflect upon and to share. For each of us here today have in some way or another experienced Jesus stopping and looking at us, and calling us by name. We, like have Zacchaeus have heard the invitation to let Jesus in so that we can come to know and understand the breadth and depth of the Divine One's, unconditional, gracious, boundless, eternal love.

You may have come to church today because Jesus intrigues you, you may want to know more, you may feel lost, or you may be here because at some point in your life Jesus has stopped and look at you and you have let him enter your life. Jesus looks at you for who you truly are, a beloved child of God. He does not judge you based on any other criteria, not on looks, status, gender, sexuality, career choices, not on what you have or haven't done, not on what you have achieved, not on your successes nor on your failures. He looks at you an ordinary everyday messed up, broken and at times lost human. The phrase I hear with thankfulness and wonder in today's story is Jesus' mission statement. I have come to save the lost. So I wonder those times when God feels far away, those times when will feel we have slipped off the firm foundation of faith in Christ, those times when we doubt ourselves, are they the moments when Jesus is passing us by waiting for us to metaphorically peep out at him from the branches of our lookout post?

Jesus stops to look at us through the eyes of immeasurable love and for that dear Lord we give you thanks.

**Amen.**