

31st Sunday in Ordinary Time

I visited my nephew in Bulgaria after the events in Rome last month. Bryan moved to Eastern Europe with Peace Corps several years ago, fell in love with that part of the world, and now works for a firm that manages and sells commercial real estate. He is an amazingly energetic man. As a bonus, an old friend of mine from Los Angeles joined that part of the trip. We have not spent a week together since being in school 30 years ago, so we enjoyed the week. Our conversations about the past brought to mind not only the good times, but also the bad. They helped me examine my conscience again, to look back on attitudes I held long ago, and actions I performed. I can see more clearly now some of the good and bad choices I made back then.

The Catholic Church recommends that people examine their consciences every night. Before going to bed, it's good to look back over the previous day, to thank God for the blessings, and to seek pardon for the sins. In addition to that daily exercise, once in a while something unusual happens that forces an examination of conscience when we weren't expecting it. Frequently, it comes as challenging words that someone else says to us. If people accuse us of misbehavior, our initial reaction may be to deny it because we usually think we're right. But there is often some truth in the difficult words that people say to us. Even though it is hard to acknowledge our sins, it is good to do it. It helps us act better in the future.

When Jesus sees Zacchaeus up in the tree, he declares his intent to stay at the tax collector's home. Immediately, the crowd grumbles. People say, "He has gone to stay at the house of a sinner." In one sentence they accuse Zacchaeus of committing sins and Jesus of misjudgment. Today you can see accusations like this on blog posts. They are a place where people feel especially free to accuse others of sin.

You would expect Zacchaeus to be self-defensive, to say, "I'm not a sinner." Instead, he accepts the accusation and immediately offers to pay back four times anything he has extorted. Then Jesus says of himself that the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.

The bad things that people say about us can be ways in which Christ still comes to seek and to save what was lost. Psalm 145 says, "The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. The Lord is good to all and compassionate toward all his works." It sounds as though God will always be loving toward us, but sometimes God's love comes through the difficult words that others say and the memories of our sins. When we respond immediately as Zacchaeus did, we can experience the unlimited compassion of God.