

This morning I want to talk a bit about the power of loneliness. You probably heard that the young man who killed two people in the latest school shooting in St. Louis left a note saying how lonely he had always felt, and that no one else cared about him or really knew him. Loneliness can be incredibly dangerous and painful, yet to some degree it is part of the human condition.

This story of Zacchaeus is one of my all-time favorites, and I think it deals with loneliness and separation. To truly enter into the event, we have to take a trip back to Jericho over 2,000 years ago. It was an important trade center, busy, bustling, noisy, overflowing with activity, people and animals milling around in the hot, dusty, dry streets. Now, a few miles away, out in the countryside, things are a little quieter and less hectic. The word is beginning to spread that this rabbi named Jesus, the one everyone is talking about, is heading this way. He has begun his final trip to Jerusalem, and he will have to pass through Jericho on his way. On major trade routes like this one, news travels fast simply by word of mouth.

Jesus has already caused a stir in the district of Judah with his preaching, teaching, and miraculous healings, so people were curious to say the least! Who was this man? Did he really have special powers? What was he like? As the word spread that he was, indeed, coming this way, you could feel the growing sense of excitement and anticipation moving through the crowds of people. Throughout the day, as Jesus and his group of followers came closer, people along both sides of the dusty road began to form groups and to jockey for position to get the best place to see this Jesus. It is sort of like in our day when people are getting ready for a big downtown parade.

Now, our friend Zacchaeus was in that growing crowd. His problem was twofold: he was too short to see over the other people, and on top of that he was a hated tax collector and therefore probably pretty rich. This obviously meant that it was highly unlikely that anyone would let him stand in front of them. He was just as curious as everyone else about this Jesus, but he was afraid to try too hard for a better position as some might take the opportunity to hurt him in some way. Desperate to find a solution, he spots a sycamore tree just behind the wall of spectators and climbs up for a better view.

And then comes the shocker which people ought to have been getting used to if they had watched Jesus in action very much as he was the king of shockers. He and his followers finally arrive and are walking down the road when suddenly Jesus hesitates and walks over in the direction of that sycamore tree. He is very personal as he yells out, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down for I must stay at your house today." Can you imagine the reactions of the people watching this? I bet little Zacchaeus about broke his neck getting down out of that tree. We are told that those in the crowd griped about Jesus going to the home of a noted sinner. It's hard not to notice that there always seemed to be grumbling and griping around Jesus.

Zacchaeus quickly tries to reassure Jesus that he is worthy of this honor as he says, "Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor and if I have cheated anyone I will pay them back fourfold!" Jesus pays no attention to that promise and simply says, "Today salvation has come to this house because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek our and to save the lost." Jesus just never, ever followed the usual, accepted, and expected ways of the world, and once again, many in the crowd were probably surprised, confused, and undoubtedly angry. What they did not understand was that Jesus was talking to them too. Even in our own day, people constantly make that same mistake, assuming that Jesus is talking to someone else, and he never is.

I find that statement of Jesus to be powerful and reassuring because I think everyone of us is sometimes lost, just like Zacchaeus. Now, we may not be short, or a tax collector, or rich, or an outcast from society, but nevertheless, there are times when we all suffer from the same sense of aloneness and isolation from the rest of the world that Zacchaeus did. We just don't like to face that or even admit that it might be true.

How is it that we are isolated from one another? What is the shape of the aloneness we all live in? It is not that obvious at first glance. It certainly is not due to not having other people all around us. Every day of our lives is filled with people, just here this morning. We are all in various groups of people, family, friends, church, work, civic clubs, neighborhoods, school and so on. The reality is that most of us are usually surrounded by one kind of crowd or another, just as Zacchaeus was.

But, still, deep within us, maybe just beyond or beneath the edge of our normal conscious thought, there is the awareness that ultimately each of us is all alone. No matter how close we are to family and friends, no one else can ever be in our skin so to speak. This is not a bad thing and it is not an accident as God created each one of us as unique, never to be repeated, human being. God has, in effect, "broken the mold," when you and I were born. Each of us is special, one of a kind, and different from everyone else, including those closest to us.

One of the results of this uniqueness is this inward sense of separation and isolation, often quite subtle, but still very real. I think there are times when this is more clear than at other times. For our little friend Zacchaeus it was on this particular day when he clearly saw and realized quite suddenly that he was too short to see over the crowd, yet too despised to be accepted as part of it. Normally he probably didn't even notice that reality, but now his "otherness" was all too evident, to the others, and to himself.

You and I have those moments too. They will be times such as when we have endured a major disappointment, could be the loss of a job, or an embarrassing mistake or failure, or maybe an unrealized hope when our life just doesn't seem right somehow. It can happen at the loss of a loved one, and especially at the funeral. It is at these times that deep inside ourselves we are reminded that no other person can completely or totally share the feeling or experience within us. No matter how close they might be to us, there are times when we are fully aware of the separation between us. Every hour of every day there are people walking in the midst of the crowded streets of New York City who feel quietly and miserably alone, but no one notices because they are focused on their own lives and we are quite good at hiding our aloneness from others. Then there are those occasional days when, for no reason we are aware of, we just feel kind of "out of it," kind of out of step with everyone else, but of course we would never admit to anyone else. Sometimes we can experience this feeling when we enter a room full of people we don't know, or when joining a new group of some kind. There is the sense of "there they are and here I am." At some level we are a little more aware of our basic separation. Sometimes we find ourselves feeling dumber, or less attractive, or not as well dressed, and of course to make it even worse, that is the day when the pimple on the nose or the cold sore on the lip springs into action.

Now, if things had been left like that, we would all be in the same situation as Zacchaeus, up a tree with no way down. But Jesus did not leave it that way, did he? Rather, he picked out the loneliest, most isolated, least likely person in the entire city to go home with. I can see the disciples now. As they are walking through Jericho on the way to Jerusalem, they are tired and have a long way to go. They see Jesus stop and then head for the little man up in the tree. They look at each other and sigh, "oh no, there he goes again." Remember this is the same journey that Jesus had stopped to heal ten

lepers, then blessed some babies, and cured a blind man. Throughout his life on earth, Jesus sought out the lonely, the outcast, the isolated, the hurting, and the unlikely.

There is only one thing that can truly and completely fill and satisfy that loneliness and emptiness that is such an integral part of the human condition. It is not worldly success, or big houses, of fancy cars, or piles of money, It is not found in having power over other people. As much as people continue to try, it is not alcohol or drugs or big parties or traveling around the world. Rather, it is choosing, and it is a choice, to believe in and accept the perfect, total, unconditional, undeserved, and yes, very personal love of God that reaches out to us every moment of every day through Jesus Christ. In the 4th century one of our most important church fathers, St. Augustine, may have summed it all up the best. He maintained that when we were born there was a God-shaped vacuum inside of us which can only be filled by a relationship with our Creator. The love is there in that vacuum, but unless we acknowledge it, and realize that we are loved by the One who knows us best, that gift of uniqueness each of us has can be a burden instead of the gift God intends.

When we say “yes” we are made whole, our lives take on new meaning, and we realize that nothing can ever separate us from the love of God for each of us just as we are. In addition to that, our separation from one another loses its power. Our God-given differences and uniqueness are no longer sources of division and alienation, but rather as the blessings God intended when he created each of us.

I think that is the power of the Holy Eucharist. After confessing our sins and receiving forgiveness, we go together as unique individuals but also as a community of faith to receive the reminder of God’s unconditional love for us as we receive the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are reminded of both our individuality as well as our oneness as his people.

Finally, notice that Jesus made the first move. He went to Zacchaeus and called him by name. It was then up to Zacchaeus to decide how to respond, to stay safely up in that sycamore tree, or climb down to the unknown life Jesus offered him. It is the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow. Jesus calls each one of us, by name, over and over again. A personal relationship with the One who dreamed each of us up in the first place, and who knows us far better than any human being is the only one that can complete us and insure that we need never feel alone again, and this is true in this life and in the next. Pretty good news I’d say.

