

Perhaps you've seen a quote making the rounds online. Attributed to Methodist pastor Steve Garnaas-Holmes, it says, "Halloween: a day when we get it right. Strangers come to us, beautiful, ugly, odd or scary, and we accept them all without question, compliment them, treat them kindly, and give them good things. Why don't we live like that?" Well, as much as I love the rituals of Halloween, and the opportunity to encourage you to bring a friend to our All Hallows' Eve service tomorrow at 6 pm, I also like peace and quiet. When I moved from an apartment to a single family home for my previous call, one of the first things I did was put a "No Soliciting" sign on the front door. Though I made an exception and took it down for Halloween.

It's a good thing I didn't live in the ancient middle east, where having a home meant that you had to provide not just a material token and a moment of your time, but the hospitality of food and shelter to anyone, friend or stranger, on very short notice. So while it sounds strange to us that Jesus would invite himself into the home of a man who had never even spoken to him, that sort of thing was almost normal.

Jesus entering Zacchaeus's house is the only normal thing in this story. A rabbi like Jesus was expected not only to observe Jewish law, but also to avoid fraternizing with notorious sinners. And the crowd was eager to point that out, as if Jesus didn't know who Zacchaeus was. But Jesus had already called him by name.

And what a name. The name Zacchaeus literally means, "clean." It's like a villain in a badly-written movie naming his biggest, strongest henchman "Tiny." Because tax collectors were the most despised people, collaborating with the brutal pagan Roman occupying force to extract as much money from the population as they could. They flagrantly violated Jewish law, custom, and social expectations. But the story goes on to show that Zacchaeus's name is not ironic, but the most hopeful kind of foreshadowing.

Luke doesn't tell us what motivated Zacchaeus. Maybe nothing more than idle curiosity. All he shows us is the wonderful image of the short man running ahead and climbing a tree just to see Jesus. Not to challenge Jesus or ask him a question, not to seek healing or forgiveness, just to see. He may have laboring under an inaccurate description of who Jesus was, and he certainly couldn't have understood the fullness of who he was, or the consequences of encountering him. And he might have been waiting up there a long time, since in the ages before fast communication and accurate timekeeping, the only way to be sure you were going to be in the right place at the right time was to get there as early as possible.

Zacchaeus's life was a public ethical disaster. He was a parasite, a sycophant, an extortionist. His home was, symbolically and in fact, an epicenter of sin. But Zacchaeus was curious, and he was willing to make an effort, and while that's not exactly faith, it's enough for Jesus to work with. And what work he did!

Without commanding or instructing him — simply by entering his home — Jesus completely transformed Zacchaeus. "Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as

much.” That’s about as profound a change as anyone shows in scripture. He’s right up there with Saul the persecutor becoming Paul the apostle. He even volunteers the correct multiple of repayment laid out in the law, in the book of Exodus, showing he’s not just feeling generous, but also choosing to submit to the law of his people, the code that binds them to God and to each other, and gives them an identity and a heritage.

A tax collector cleaning up his act is only shocking if we forget that God does this sort of thing again and again in scripture. As Richard Rohr points out, “The path of descent, or the pattern of falling upward, is found throughout the Bible. Jacob’s son, Joseph, is thrown into the well by his own brothers and then rescued. The prophet Jeremiah is thrown into a cistern by the civil leaders after he preaches retreat and defeat, and he is rescued by a eunuch. Jonah is swallowed by a whale and then spit up on the right shore. The people of Israel are sent into exile in Babylon and then released and allowed to return home by Cyrus, the King of Persia. Enslavement and exodus is the great lens through which Jewish history is read.”

Remembering this, today’s Gospel goes from exceptional to inevitable. And the story also foreshadows the last and greatest event of enslavement and exodus, the one carried out by God himself, the death of Jesus, his descent among the dead, his liberation of the souls held captive there and his own triumphal resurrection— which in turn foreshadows our own.

But we don’t wait until the end of our natural lives to encounter Jesus and his transformational power. The Church has always taught that Jesus is really and physically present in the Eucharist. That is why Christians have always placed such great emphasis on that sacrament. Quite unlike Zacchaeus and everyone else who met Jesus in the Gospels, we have a decent idea of who he is, and even some idea of what it means to receive him under the forms of bread and wine. Renewing the bond established in our baptism, we are reunited with Jesus and given a foretaste of the transformation of our souls that will ultimately make us able to stand before God in heaven and see him as he is.

This vision is reflected in the beautiful vessels we use to contain the Eucharist, both liturgical objects made from precious metals and some of the most beautiful buildings in the world. Archbishop of Paris, Michel Aupetit, after the catastrophic fire at Notre Dame, said, “We must ask why Notre Dame was constructed. Why this human genius? — because they could have done something functional. It’s far more than functional. And why? Because what is honored there is absolutely splendid, that’s what we believe. And if you want to ask the real question, what jewel is this jewel box for? It’s not for the Crown of Thorns... It’s for a piece of bread. It’s astonishing. How can one construct such a work of art for a piece of bread? That piece of bread is the Body of Christ. And that endures. Nobody will ever be able to destroy that.”

While we might take comfort, or even pride, in the biblical image of our bodies as temples, we should also remember the saying: Outside of a dog, a book is a man’s best

friend. Inside of a dog, it's too dark to read.

These temples have some dark corners, places we might not be quite ready to have illuminated by the light of Christ. Unlike Zacchaeus, we can choose to invite Jesus in, or not. But that's the extent of our control. If we do invite him, Jesus might just make himself at home within us, and start rearranging the furniture and hauling out the trash.

We might be tempted to treat Jesus like a trick-or-treater, to throw some token his way, send him along, and shut the door. But what would that accomplish? Instead, our goal should be to cultivate a deeper relationship with him, even though — or because — he will change us. Although people do dress up like Jesus, Jesus never pretends to be anyone he isn't, so we should treat him like the traveler from the ancient middle eastern that he is, and invite him in.

If a tax collector can show adequate hospitality for the Lord, all of us can, too. So even if you love peace, or especially if you do, make an exception for Jesus. Prepare to welcome Jesus in with honest prayer and self-examination. You probably already know some of what needs to change to make his stay as fruitful and harmonious as possible, and that's good work. Jesus will do the rest. Jesus will seek us out and save us. Today salvation has come to this house, to all of us. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.