

“Experiencing with Zacchaeus” Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through. And behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. And when they saw it, they all grumbled, “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.” And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.”

It is annoying. And it is frustrating. And it can make us angry, and disappointed. It quite often annoys and frustrates and makes me angry and disappointed. I am talking about how people misunderstand what the Church is, what Christianity is about and what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ.

When many and many in our society hear about the Church, about Christian faith, about being a Christian, they have a certain picture, certain associations appearing in their mind. And those are often so, so far from the truth.

And the annoying thing is that regardless of how many times you try to correct those different misunderstanding, they are like some super-weeds, whatever you do to them, they still keep springing up again and again.

In a way, we could say that it makes sense. For we live in the world that can't understand Christianity. We live in the world, where Christian message and lifestyle is as contra intuitive as you can get.

We live in the world of merit and judgment. Everyone gets what they deserve. Or at least we believe that everyone should get what they deserve. If you do the right things, you should be good. If you do wrong, don't be surprised...

This is how this world supposedly functions. Merit and judgment based. If you do for me this, I will do for you that. If you don't do for me this, I won't do for you that. This is how also all the religions function.

They believe and teach that everyone needs to receive what they deserve. And when they realize that justice and judgment not always come during this life, they assume and teach that it will come in the next. As bad karma, or as some sort of a punishment after the death.

Even secular people have this mindset. I have mentioned it before, that a business partner of mine, confessing not to be religious, at the same time believed that when this life is over, he will have to give an account for how he

has lived this life. So, it is no wonder, that having this universal merit and judgement-based mindset people misunderstand what Christianity is. They think that it is one more religion that teaches you how to be mostly good.

That is how they often perceive the Church. As a community of people who try to be good, who come together to learn how to lead good moral lives. And if that is how someone understands the Church, how they understand Christianity, you can't blame them for not being interested in it. Why would they?

Then you can understand why people complain about Christians saying that they know some of them and they are... often the word "hypocrites" is used, or some other descriptions that don't sound too good.

Then you can understand that people are happy to take what they call "Christian values", adopt them in their lives, admitting that those are kind of good things, and they help us to get along, but ... you don't need to go to church!

You can live your meritorious and moral life on your own. Perhaps even better than those hypocritical Christians. And if that was all that Christianity is about, then they would be right. Learn what works, and don't waste your time.

And perhaps we too need to examine what we believe – so that we don't start thinking about ourselves as a community of good and moral people, trying to learn how to lead good lives and to be nice to others, to avoid any judgment both now and in the age to come. I would even guess that this misunderstanding explains why many have left the Church, even people whom we know.

Our today's Gospel reading helps us to see how wrong such misunderstandings are. Christianity is not about meriting something and getting what you deserve. It is about the very opposite.

It is about not getting what we deserve, and getting what we don't deserve. It is about grace. More specifically, about God's grace towards us. Let's take a look at what happened between Jesus and Zacchaeus, that will help.

As Luke has recorded, Jesus was passing through the town of Jericho. As usually great crowds were accompanying Him. As we can easily imagine many wanted something from Jesus. Some wanted healing, some blessings, some - words of wisdom, some – attention from Jesus and so on. But Jesus was just heading on His way...

There was a man in this town. His name was Zacchaeus. In a few words Luke gives us rather vivid a picture of who this Zacchaeus was. He was a chief tax collector and he was rich.

That's enough said, if we know anything about the culture of that time. Tax collectors were hated by everyone. That hatred was well deserved. They usually were corrupt and greedy, thinking about themselves first, and taking money, which they hadn't earned.

Zacchaeus wasn't just a tax collector. He was a chief tax collector. The tax collector of tax collectors. The evil behind the evil. And he was rich. Now we may wonder about his strange behaviour.

“And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small in stature. So, he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way.”

Actually, his behaviour wasn't that strange. He had good reasons to stay away from the crowd. When you are a tax collector, a chief tax collector at that, you would have many, many enemies.

And to be in the midst of the crowd, among the people, many of whom would be rather quick to use their daggers to settle their business with a man like him, that would be a really dangerous place for Zacchaeus.

Besides, he was a shorty. Even if he was surrounded and protected by his minions, he probably couldn't see Jesus. But to see Jesus was what he longed for. We may wonder – why? We can only make some informed guesses.

Quite likely his conscience wasn't that clear. Quite likely he wouldn't match the criteria of a good and moral community leader. As we can read it, the crowd grumbled and called him a sinner.

Perhaps he had heard about this unusual teacher, about this Jesus, who was notorious for eating with sinners. Perhaps he had heard about the message of God's grace that this Jesus had for everyone who only wanted to hear it.

Perhaps that was what Zacchaeus needed. The message of God grace, the message of God's unconditional love and acceptance in spite of what sort of person Zacchaeus was. He was seeking Jesus...

But it was Jesus who came to Him. God's grace always surpasses our limited expectations. As Zacchaeus was hiding in the tree, Jesus stopped and said something Zacchaeus neither deserved, nor was ever expecting to hear.

“Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.” God's grace... it catches us off guard... it descends upon us and changes everything. Just as it did to this shorty chief tax collector.

So, he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. Just picture this shorty man, trying to quickly get down from the thick and sticky tree, perhaps a little bit embarrassed that he was spotted in such unusual a place, perhaps overwhelmed that Jesus Himself had spoken with him.

That the famous Jesus had invited Himself to stay in his house. In the house of a sinner. Joyfully, this is how Luke describes Zacchaeus response to Jesus' invitation. He received Jesus joyfully. He had just received something that he knew he most certainly didn't deserve. He had experienced God's grace.

The reaction of all the merit and judgment orientated people was what could be expected. They grumbled. “He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner.” They were right. Jesus had done it indeed. Zacchaeus was a sinner.

But listen what happened next. God’s grace is not a weak and useless thing. It is an all transforming power, that takes over the person who receives it. It comes and changes us, it changes our hearts, it creates new hearts that are keen to respond to this grace, that long to respond to this grace.

That’s exactly what happened. Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold.”

He wasn’t asked. That wasn’t their deal. “Hey, Jesus, you come to my party, and I will give a donation to your movement.” There was no merit. It was pure grace, God’s grace in Jesus, unexpected, totally unmerited, powerfully humbling and transforming.

The experience of this grace changed Zacchaeus. He simply couldn’t remain who he was. He wasn’t anymore the same man who climbed the tree a few hours earlier. The grace of God had made him a new creation.

He couldn’t not to respond. “Lord, accept my humble gratitude. See what I will do. I am yours with all that I have.” Jesus had graciously given Himself to the chief tax collector Zacchaeus.

And by doing that Jesus had paid the price. Because of this grace, He was despised and rejected by the crowd of good and moral people who thought that they had merited Jesus attention more than this sinner.

But God’s grace bestowed to Zacchaeus wasn’t in vain. It changed Zacchaeus. He turned away from what was his god before, – money, to give himself fully to the true God of grace, to Jesus.

And Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost.” This is what the Church, what Christianity is about.

About God’s grace being abundantly poured on the lost. On those who don’t deserve it. On those who haven’t merited it. On those who deserve God’s judgment. We all are in that category... On everyone who only seeks to see this Jesus, as Zacchaeus did.

The Church is about God’s grace, about God not giving us what we have merited – for we reject, ignore, disobey and even hate Him, but He keeps giving us what we don’t deserve – His faithfulness, His divine love, His unshakable commitment, His life-changing forgiveness, His undivided loyalty.

We as Christians are not better than others, but we are more blessed than others. Undeservedly. By that we mean true blessings, the greatest of blessings – we

not only have received God's grace, but most of time we are also conscious about it. Interestingly enough, even our new name reflects the very heart of our Christian faith. We are not called "Moral people" Lutheran church, or "Christian values" Lutheran church. We are "Grace" Lutheran church.

I pray today that we would all experience God's grace as powerfully as Zacchaeus did. I pray that this experience then would transform us and would allow us to follow Jesus and to do what pleases Him, with the same passion and commitment as Zacchaeus did.

So that listening to our grace filled words and seeing our grace motivated actions people of this world would realize that the Church is not about "good morals". That being a Christian is about sharing generously God's grace that we so abundantly keep receiving every day through His Son, through our gracious brother Jesus Christ.

And perhaps experiencing that grace, as Zacchaeus did, will change them as well. Amen.