

“Home: I See You”
Luke 19:1-10

There was a recent news story that caught my attention about a Sunfish in a Japanese aquarium. Evidently, it got depressed when the aquarium temporarily closed. The Sunfish story from Japan:

<https://youtu.be/nFlaB2geqJQ>

You may say that this fish is a social being. Being seen through the eyes of love is an important part of our human experience. Yet, we don't always look at each other with the eyes of love. Sometimes we even neglect to see others altogether. Others become invisible to us. Think of when you are in a hurry or at the store. You may buy your items without even seeing the face of the staff who helped you. They in turn might not have taken the time to even look at you. This even gets worse if we have strong feelings, prejudices, or biases against someone or a group of people. One of the things that we can be intentional about when connecting with anyone is to focus on their humanity first, the image of God that is within them. This could apply to someone you disagree with or someone who has disabilities. Instead of looking at them as a person who has a disability, you can look at them as a human being who is complex and worthy of respect and love.

Jesus modeled this for us so many times. Instead of seeing people through the labels put on them by the culture, Jesus saw each person as unique and worthy of his love and respect. He always had the eyes to see through God's love, especially those who were deemed unworthy and thus became invisible.

We have a powerful example of that in the encounter Jesus had with a man named Zachaeus. The main character in the story from the Gospel of Luke is a tax collector by the name of Zacchaeus. He was a despised man by society and from a human point of view, he deserved every bit of it. The scarcity-driven dream of “more is better” had taken a hold of him that he was willing to cheat his own people out of their money. At the time of Jesus, tax collectors were seen as collaborators with the Roman Empire and its occupation of the land and its people. They were agents of oppression. They not only collected the tax which the Roman government required, but they also added to the bill to get themselves a piece of the pie. They were legal crooks. Zacchaeus was rich, and his wealth came as a result of exploiting others. His description as a short man might be seen as a metaphor for his diminished spirit.

Biblical scholar Verity Jones notes that, “To handle the vast sums, publicans (tax collectors) like Zacchaeus formed associations something like modern corporations, each headed by a lead bidder and a few officers backed by many investors. Having bid to deliver to Rome a specified amount from a province, they worked with local officials, who collected within their own districts. Taxes on agriculture and import customs were subject to unpredictable fluctuations, so getting the numbers right was a tricky business. Publicans were also moneylenders, speculators, and contractors supplying material for

the army. Such enterprises provided opportunities for cooking the books, commodities speculation, side deals, graft, and extortion to defraud Rome, local officials, fellow investors, and average citizens."

This gives us some perspective as to why Zacchaeus did not have a good reputation in his community. Zacchaeus was labeled by society as a no-good kind of person. He had a powerful position in a very important town: Jericho. There were at least two major highways in Israel at that time and one of them went right through Jericho. Jericho was the customs station, and thousands of Jews came through there and they had to pay taxes on every cow, calf, and camel that came through customs. So, with his position as chief publican who had the contract for tax collection, Zacchaeus took advantage of the Jews and exploited their religious celebrations to collect money. The story took place around Passover time which meant that tens of thousands of Jewish pilgrims were coming down from Galilee, going around Samaria because it was unsafe, and coming through the toll booth at Jericho and paying their taxes.

Jesus was making this trip, from up north in Galilee, coming south through Jericho to Jerusalem. Jesus had every reason to ignore Zacchaeus and to continue to let him be resented by others. Let's listen to the story from Luke 19:1-10

He entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When 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." ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, "He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner." ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, "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." ⁹Then Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

The act of being seen and recognized by Jesus as a person of worth, changed everything for Zachaeus and for his whole community. Instead of seeing himself as a small man, physically and morally, he saw himself as worthy of God's love. Theologian and writer Henri Nouwen wrote that, "When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, 'Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody.'... Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the 'Beloved.' Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence."

That is how the healing of Zachaeus took place. Jesus knew that he was stuck in that trap of self-rejection. He didn't make him taller or ask him to change his profession.

Instead, he saw him as worthy of Jesus to go into his house and to have dinner together. Not only did Jesus go to Zacchaeus' home, but he also told him that he was going to stay with him. The word "meno" in the New Testament Greek always shows how God dwells among us to transform our lives and our world. Jesus' visit to the home of Zacchaeus was not going to be a casual one. It was about the presence of God dwelling in Zacchaeus' home and heart. This dwelling presence radically changed Zacchaeus' life. He repented from his old ways of greed and gave away half of his possessions. Zacchaeus' vision of life also changed. The story was significant enough to be recorded.

Seeing the image of God in others takes intentional practice and daily alignment with God's heart of love. Yet, it is worth it as it makes all the difference in the world. Take the time to spend in God's presence to allow you to see the image of God in others.

Here is a powerful example from an artist who decided to "see" his neighbors who were experiencing homelessness. He started by drawing them with a lot of color which was not the way they saw themselves or the way others saw them. Brian Peterson changing lives through art: <https://youtu.be/Ds2Z2y1XbRw>.

Most of us do not have the artistic abilities that Brian has but all of us have the ability to allow God to transform our vision of others and of ourselves. I recently learned a spiritual practice from Dr. Sara Allen called "Eleven Breaths." She in turn had become aware of this technique through a lecture she attended given by Stuart Wilde. So the practice is simply to say the name of the person you are struggling with before you inhale. And take a deep breath. Then before you exhale, say, "love," and send love to the person. Do this ten times. Then on the eleventh breath, visualize a hologram of the person resting in the palm of our right hand. After you say "Love" for the eleventh time, imagine this person covered with the healing energies of divine love. Let's take a couple of minutes to practice this together. Amen.