

2 Thessalonians 1:1-4, 11-12

I, Paul, together with Silas and Timothy, greet the church of the Thessalonian Christians in the name of God our Father and our Master, Jesus Christ. Our God gives you everything you need, makes you everything you're to be.

You need to know, friends, that thanking God over and over for you is not only a pleasure; it's a must. We *have* to do it. Your faith is growing phenomenally; your love for each other is developing wonderfully. Why, it's only right that we give thanks. We're so proud of you; you're so steady and determined in your faith despite all the hard times that have come down on you.

We tell everyone we meet in the churches all about you.

We pray for you all the time—pray that our God will make you fit for what he's called you to be, pray that he'll fill your good ideas and acts of faith with his own energy so that it all amounts to something. If your life honors the name of Jesus, he will honor you. Grace is behind and through all of this, our God giving himself freely, the Master, Jesus Christ, giving himself freely.

Luke 19:1-10

Then Jesus entered and walked through Jericho. There was a man there, his name Zacchaeus, the head tax man and quite rich. He wanted desperately to see Jesus, but the crowd was in his way—he was a short man and couldn't see over the crowd. So he ran on ahead and climbed up in a sycamore tree so he could see Jesus when he came by.

When Jesus got to the tree, he looked up and said, “Zacchaeus, hurry down. Today is my day to be a guest in your home.” Zacchaeus scrambled out of the tree, hardly believing his good luck, delighted to take Jesus home with him. Everyone who saw the incident was indignant and grumped, “What business does he have getting cozy with this crook?”

Zacchaeus just stood there, a little stunned. He stammered apologetically, “Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages.”

Jesus said, “Today is salvation day in this home! Here he is: Zacchaeus, son of Abraham! For the Son of Man came to find and restore the lost.”

Let Us Choose to Abide in Jesus

I guess it was about a year and a half ago that Lorraine first came into our church having inquired if there was a group she could get involved with in the church and being told by a barefoot woman outside the church that there just happened to be a group meeting at that very moment. The rest, we say, is history. Lorraine came wanting to do something, and we happened to be doing something. And I think that since Lorraine has been coming to Bethel we have been doing a lot more.

But I know that it wasn't just our “busy-ness” that brought Lorraine into this church and kept her IN the church, because there are plenty of organizations that are quite busy doing things that Lorraine did NOT get involved with. Alright, to be honest it helped that we happen to be a two minute walk from her house, but there are people that Lorraine would not want to become involved with, and there activities that she would not want to be engaged in, even if they were a short walk from her house. What drew Lorraine to Bethel – aside from our proximity - was a combination of the people she met and the work that they were doing. Lorraine met people who

were inspired by Jesus Christ to do the things that Jesus Christ would have them do. Simply put, she met people who had chosen to abide in Christ. They weren't perfect people – none of us are, but they have enough of the qualities that are evidence of person who abides in Christ to attract Lorraine into the church as they have attracted others to the church.

And that is the essence of what it means to be a Christian; Christians, to put it simply, ABIDE IN CHRIST. Lorraine suffered through months of a Bible Study on Methodism, and she probably learned things that she wished she hadn't about John Wesley and the Methodist movement, but I could say that Methodism, in its essence, boils down to a life of abiding in Christ, of being inspired by Christ to live a life that is pleasing to God. John Wesley and his brother Charles and George Whitefield and all those other Methodists were reacting to a spiritual sickness that had taken over England, and they worked with all their energy to save souls for Jesus Christ; they spent their days preaching and praying and showing people God's love and grace and inspiring them to do what Jesus taught us to do.

That's what salvation really boils down to. There are people who believe that the gates of heaven are only open to those who belong to a particular religion and profess a particular doctrine, but *that's not what Jesus tells us*. Jesus shows us a way to live our lives, and he invites us to try it. And when we choose to live that life we indeed abide in Christ. That is what happens in today's Gospel story. Zacchaeus climbs a tree to see Jesus because of the crowd – and by the way, it doesn't say the Zacchaeus is short; Luke just says that Zacchaeus climbed a tree because *he* was short in stature. It could have been Jesus who was short in stature and the story would still make perfect sense; I think that the reason everyone interprets the passage to mean that Zacchaeus is short is because we think of tallness as an attribute and shortness means a deficit, and we don't think of Jesus as having such a deficit, and Zacchaeus already has the deficit of being chief among tax collectors – but is shortness a real deficit? Couldn't Jesus have been short?

Anyway, I digressed. The point Zacchaeus is noticed by Jesus who INVITES HIMSELF to Zacchaeus' home...to his *abode* ('abide' and 'abode' both have come from same root word meaning "to stay with." Jesus invites himself to ABIDE with Zacchaeus, and Zacchaeus accepts the invitation immediately. In fact, Jesus begins to *abide* in Zacchaeus before going to his *abode*. How do we know that Zacchaeus is abiding in Jesus? Because he tells Jesus that he has changed: "Master, I give away half my income to the poor—and if I'm caught cheating, I pay four times the damages." He doesn't say that tomorrow he's going to change. He doesn't make some vague promise to start doing it next week when it's Lent; Zacchaeus says, "This is who I am now."

And notice how Jesus responds: he declares to the people, "Today is salvation day in this home!" Jesus doesn't expect Zacchaeus to recite any creed. He doesn't ask Zacchaeus to affirm Jesus' divinity. *Jesus recognizes that Zacchaeus is now living a new life in accordance with the will of God, and because of that he is saved.*

This is what salvation is all about; this is what being a Christian is all about. It's a shame that so many churches have strayed from this fundamental truth, telling people instead that it's all about creeds and dogma, teaching people that salvation is all about *saying* what you believe and not *acting* in the way that Jesus invites us to act. This is the behavior that Jesus speaks about in his Sermon on the Mountain – showing kindness without inward hate, goodwill without retaliation,

respect for *all* people, sincerity and integrity so that when you say "yes" you mean yes and your word is your bond; magnanimity, like Lincoln's, with malice toward none, with charity for all; kindness which helps others without strings attached, so the right hand doesn't know what the left hand does – this is a way of life that we can choose to live in the here and now.

It's not an easy life. We know that trials come our way. We may have struggles with sin as temptation rears its ugly head or struggles with our faith as we witness the suffering of those near and dear to us, and that's why we need a church. The author of 2 Thessalonians writes not to an individual but a church when he says, "You're so steady and determined in your faith despite all the hard times that have come down on you." As individuals we cannot bear all the hardships that life can throw at us, which is why so many *individuals* fall into despair. We need each other to help one another get through the struggles and to help one another *abide in Christ*.

We especially need one another to abide in Christ this day and age, because so much of what Jesus teaches us is forgotten or distorted. So much of what the Bible says is misinterpreted in ways that can do harm to people; I already gave you an example of how we assume Zacchaeus is the short guy because he's the bad guy; that interpretation is not fair to short people. Here's another example: Jesus teaches us to "walk the extra mile." If you Google stories about "walking the extra mile" you get stories about people putting in extra effort at work or in school to achieve more – a lot of it is about self-improvement. But in Jesus' day that expression would have meant something far more scandalous. Jesus' homeland was under the dominion of the Roman Empire, and any Roman soldier had the right to command any person he saw to carry his rucksack for one mile, and refusing to do so could result in a beating or your own death. There were no waivers, no get-out-of-carrying-this-guy's-rucksack free cards. You could not plead your case to an "understanding" Roman soldier. You just did it, and if you were a day laborer it usually cost you a half a day's wages so your family would go to sleep hungry at night. This was not a popular law in Judea, and you can imagine how people would react to Jesus teaching them to "walk an extra mile" with the enemy. I heard a story once of a young Christian man, still living in a time of Roman occupation, a young man who went to a small church where people strove to live a Christian life, to abide in Christ, and he heard Jesus' lesson about walking the extra mile, and was moved to do so when he was actually ordered to carry a soldier's rucksack. The first mile he walked behind the soldier, in silence, faithfully doing as he was told. When a mile had passed the soldier told the young man that he was released from his duty. But the young man said to the soldier, "That's alright. I feel pretty strong and don't mind carrying it for another mile." You can imagine how surprised the soldier was; he was used to the people's contempt and resentments, but here was a young man who was *choosing* to help him. The next mile the young man walked *beside* the soldier and not behind him. The next mile was not spent in silence but in conversation as the two men, now seeming equal in many ways, shared stories of their families and interests. And at the end of that second mile there was not so much a sense of relief but a sense of regret that the two men were parting ways. The Roman soldier shook the young man's hand the way he shook the hand of a fellow soldier, of a friend and comrade.

The young man in the story I shared was able to understand the meaning of what Jesus was teaching us, and he made the effort to follow that teaching. He was truly abiding in Christ during that walk. My friends, abiding in Christ does not come easy for any of us, and abiding in Christ requires us to be vigilant in guarding our souls from false teaching and from laziness, but

salvation comes to those who willingly abide in Christ. Let us commit ourselves to one another as we pursue the Christian life. Let us strive to abide in Christ and help one another in so doing.