

I'm always amazed at how the Holy Spirit works in our lives. This week, I was struggling for inspiration for this homily until a song came on the radio in my car as I was driving to work one day. The song was *The God Who Stays* by Matthew West. It's a relatively new song and I had never heard it before that day. The lyrics really caught my attention because they're especially appropriate for today on this 31st Sunday in Ordinary Time.

The song starts out with lyrics that can be all too familiar in our culture. It starts, "If I were You I would've given up on me by now. I would've labeled me a lost cause 'cause I feel just like a lost cause. If I were You I would've turned around and walked away. I would've labeled me beyond repair 'cause I feel like I'm beyond repair." Unfortunately, we all probably know someone who feels this way about their relationship with God. They feel separated from God due to their shame, their guilt, or their failures. Maybe we even feel that way sometimes.

I can imagine Zacchaeus from our Gospel story feeling this way. He was the richest man in all of Jericho but he was despised by his own people because he was a tax collector. He was considered an outcast and a traitor because, in those days, tax collectors made money by squeezing the people for more taxes than the Roman Empire demanded and skimming off the excess for themselves. He was obviously very good at his job because the Gospel mentions that he's was a chief tax collector and a wealthy man.

Like Zacchaeus, we're all sinners. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, shattered our relationship with God. As a result, we became lost and the rebellion spread. We've tried to achieve happiness by our own power, without God. We've tried to replace God with money, pleasure, or popularity. We've banned God from most of our classrooms and workplaces. We've tried to make ourselves God.

We're in good company though. Saint Paul, one of the greatest saints who ever lived, called himself the greatest of sinners in his letter to Saint Timothy. He was temperamental and, before his conversion, was one of the strongest persecutors of the early Church. Yet, because of his encounter with Jesus, he crisscrossed the Mediterranean world to bring the good news of Jesus Christ to countless people. He ultimately died as a martyr for Christ. Saint Paul took Jesus' words in today's Gospel seriously: "The Son of Man has come to seek and save what was lost."

Each one of us needs to be sought and saved because true happiness is impossible separated from God. We were created to live in communion with Him. Our happiness, on earth and in heaven, depends on living in friendship with God. Jesus came to rebuild the friendship between the human family and God; to reconcile that broken relationship. He wants to give us the courage to live as we ought to live. He desires for us to experience the satisfaction we were meant to experience. That is His mission.

Whatever his faults may have been, Zacchaeus took great trouble to look for some contact with Jesus. He wanted to get a glimpse of what kind of man Jesus was. For this, he was prepared, quite literally, to go out on a limb, the leafy branch of a sycamore tree. He went to extravagant lengths to see Jesus, to really encounter him. In the process he found that the one he was searching for was also searching for him. "Come down, for I must stay at your house today," said Jesus.

God is always seeking us. Sometimes, we believe that we're the ones looking for Him, but the only reason we can even look for Him is because He's already looking for us. Saint John of the Cross said that if we're seeking God, know that He is seeking us even more. If we recognize a certain lostness in ourselves, we can allow ourselves to be found by Jesus, just as He found Zacchaeus.

Jesus didn't walk by that sycamore tree by accident. He'd been planning His encounter with Zacchaeus. Zacchaeus was mired in his sins, trapped in a selfishness he couldn't escape. Jesus came to find him, just like He comes to find us.

But Jesus didn't only come to seek. He came to save. We can't heal ourselves from sin. Whether it appears to be a terrible, glaring sin, or whether we think it's some minor offence, we can't save ourselves. But Jesus can. And in today's Gospel, He sets Zacchaeus free. This is the meaning of Christ's wonderful words that He came to seek and save what was lost.

Getting back to the song I referenced at the beginning, the chorus goes, "You're the God who stays. You're the one who runs in my direction when the whole world walks away. You're the God who stands with wide open arms and You tell me nothing I have ever done can separate my heart from the God who stays."

Brothers and sisters, that's the kind of God we have. He knows our weaknesses but He loves us anyway. He doesn't want us to stay lost or to keep hurting ourselves and others by our habitual fears and failings. Notice Jesus' words: 'Today, salvation has come to this house!' The Church wants each of us to hear these same words. There's a grace here in today's liturgy for each and all of us. We're fragile. We make mistakes. We're more frightened than we dare to admit. We're often lost and bewildered. Yet, today, this same Jesus is inviting us to look into our hearts and discover there our longing for Him.

If seeking and saving what was lost is Jesus' mission, then it's also the Church's mission. And if it's the Church's mission, it's also our mission. Amid the difficulties, sufferings, and preoccupations of life in a fallen world, it's easy to forget that. But if we want to grow and persevere in our friendship with God, we simply can't let ourselves forget.

We're all surrounded by people like Zacchaeus, people convinced that happiness can be found in money, pleasure, or popularity. But deep down in their hearts, they know instinctively that it's not true, so they climb all kinds of trees – New Age trees, yoga trees, self-indulgence trees, even actual trees – trying to catch a glimpse of the true Savior.

By courageously being Christ's messengers in word, deed, and example, we can bring them the satisfaction of finding forgiveness, redemption, and purpose, just like Zacchaeus found. We can bring peace to troubled souls – not a peace that comes from us, since we are still imperfect, but the peace that only comes from Jesus Christ, the King of Peace. And when we do that, we will also bring peace to our troubled society.

This mission may seem too big for us. But it's not, because we don't have to do it alone. Today, Jesus will come and strengthen us again with His very own life, in Holy Communion. He will renew His promise to be with us, to guide us, to comfort us. Will you renew your promise to follow in His footsteps?