Sunday, June 26, 1977
THE MOST NEEDED COMMODITY
Luke 19:1-10

He began his life with all the classic handicaps and disadvantages. His mother was a powerfully built, dominating woman who found it difficult to love anyone. She had been married three times, and her second husband divorced her because she beat him up regularly. The father of this child was her third husband. He died of a heart attack a few months before the child's birth. As a consequence, the mother had to work long hours from his earliest childhood.

She gave him no affection, no love, no discipline, and no training in those early years. He was not allowed to call her at work. Other children had little to do with him, so he was alone most of the time. He was absolutely rejected from his earliest childhood. He was ugly and poor and untrained and unloved. When he was 13 years old, a school psychologist commented that he probably didn't know the meaning of the word "love." During adolescence, the girls would have nothing to do with him and he fought with the boys.

Despite a high IQ, he failed academically and finally dropped out during his third year of high school. He thought he might find a new acceptance in the Marine Corps; they reportedly built men, and he wanted to be one. But his problems went with him. The other marines laughed at him. He fought back, resisted authority and was court-martialed and thrown out of the marines with an undesirable discharge. So, there he was — a young man in his early twenties — absolutely friendless and shipwrecked. He was small and scrawny in stature. He had an adolescent squeak in his voice. He was getting bald. He had no talent, no skill, so sense of worth. He didn't even have a driver's license.

Once again, he thought he could run from his problems, so he went to live in a foreign country. But he was rejected there too. Nothing had changed. While there, he married a girl who herself had been an illegitimate child and brought her back to America with him. Soon, she began to develop the same contempt for him that everyone else displayed. She bore him two children, but he never enjoyed the status and respect that a father should have. His marriage began to crumble. His wife demanded more and more things that he could not provide. Instead of being his ally against the bitter world, as he hoped, she became his most vicious opponent. She could outfight him, and she learned to bully him. On one occasion, she locked him in the bathroom as punishment. Finally, she forced him to leave.

He tried to make it on his own but was terribly lonely. After days of being alone, he went home and literally begged her to take him back. He surrendered all pride. He crawled. He came on her terms. Despite his meager salary, he brought her $75 as a gift, asking her to take it and spend it any way she wished. But she laughed at him. She belittled his feeble attempts to supply the family's needs. She made fun of his sexual impotency in front of a friend who was there. At one point, he fell on his knees and wept bitterly as the greater darkness of his private nightmare enveloped him.

Finally in silence he pleaded no more. No one wanted him. No one had ever wanted him. The next day he was a strangely different man. He got up; went to the garage; and took down a rifle he had hidden there. He carried it with him to his newly acquired job at a book storage building. And from a window on the third floor of that building shortly after noon, November 22, 1963, he sent two bullets crashing into the head of President John Kennedy.

Lee Harvey Oswald, the rejected, unlovable failure, killed the man who more than any other man he knew embodied all the success, beauty, wealth, and family affection which he lacked. In firing that rifle, he utilized the one skill he had learned in his entire, miserable life.

Oswald's personal problems do not excuse his violent behavior, and my mentioning them here is not an attempt to absolve him of the responsibility and blame. But an understanding of his inner torment and confusion can help us to see him, not only as an assassin, but also as the pitiful, broken man that he was. Almost every day of his life, from the lonely days of childhood to the televised moment of his spectacular death, Oswald experienced the crushing awareness of his own inferiority. He felt no self-worth, no self-esteem. Finally, as it often does, his grief turned to anger.

The greater tragedy is that Lee Harvey Oswald's plight is not unusual in our time or in times past. While others may respond less aggressively, this same consuming awareness of inadequacy can be found in many places.

This was the problem Zacchaeus faced in the story from the Gospel of Luke. His early childhood could've been similar to that of Oswald's. No one liked him. He was small and scrawny in stature. That's why he had to climb a tree in order to see Jesus as he was passing by. He had no self-esteem, in spite of the fact that he had become rich as a tax collector.

So, Zacchaeus was surprised when Jesus noticed him and even treated him as a person of worth. More· than tha.t, Jesus was going to be a guest in his home. That was the highest compliment anyone would give a person. Because of his meeting with Jesus, Zacchaeus was beginning to have that most needed commodity which all of us need — self-worth, self-esteem.

Up to this point in his 1ife, Zacchaeus had been bitterly disappointed with who he was and what he represented. He was like many in our time who, in a world what worships superstars and beautiful people, look in the mirror for the signs of greatness and are not happy with what they see. They lack that most needed commodity, self-esteem, or self-worth.

So important is this commodity that Virginia Satir, in a book entitled "PEOPLEMAKING" says that in all troubled families she has worked with, she found a lack of self-esteem and self-worth.

Every age poses its own unique threats to self-esteem. For example, I am convinced that senility and mental deterioration in old age often come from a growing awareness by the aged that they live in the exclusive world of the young, where wrinkles, backaches, and dentures are matters of scorn, where their ideas are out-of-date and their continued existence a burden.

But if self-esteem, self-worth is such a needed commodity, why do so many lack it and how is it obtained?

1. In the first place, many persons lack self-esteem because we and others evaluate human worth by the wrong standards which means not everyone is seen as worthy. Often praise and admiration are reserved for just a few who have the characteristics which society values most highly, and from little on up, children pick up clues that worthiness and social approval are beyond reach for them.

For example, one of the most highly valued personal attributes in our culture and in many others is physical attractiveness, beauty. Accordingly, the personal worth of a newborn baby is

often anxiously evaluated by his or her parents as they examine the baby's body and its accessories.

This distorted system of evaluating human worth according to physical attractiveness is widespread. Some years ago, in Chicago, eight student nurses were viciously murdered. The following day, a commentator was discussing the violent event on the radio, and he said, "The thing that makes this tragedy much worse is that all eight of these girls were so attractive." He was implying that the girls were more valuable human beings because of their beauty. If one accepts that statement, then the opposite is also true: the murders would have been less tragic if homely girls were involved.

"A pretty girl is like a melody." What's a not-so-pretty girl like?

Very early in life, children begin to learn the social importance of physical beauty. Most children are able to determine the relative worth of their own physical arrangement by the time they enter kindergarten. Recently, I overheard a 36-year-old man say, "I was five years old when I realized that I was ugly, and I've never been the same since."

The Christian faith however continually underscored the fact that all human beings are created worthy and have the right to personal respect and dignity. And that's the way Jesus treated people. Zacchaeus is an example. Cultural values are not God's values. God sees us differently!

2. A second personal attribute which too often becomes a measure of a person's worth or esteem is "intelligence." Shortly after examining their baby's ears, eyes, nose, and other physical characteristics for imperfections, most new parents begin looking for signs that they are the parents of a budding genius. And believe it or not, they seem to find it.

A child's growth and development are so rapid during the first years of life that the awestruck parents watch their brilliant creation in amazement. "Only eight months ago, the child was almost completely helpless; now look at her! She said'mama'six full weeks before the average child; this child's got a real head on her shoulders." They give her credit for having smiled at five days of age when in reality the child was grimacing from a severe gas pain.

As the child enters her second year of life, evidence mounts that she is intellectually superior. "You wouldn't believe how that girl can think and reason; she remembers things I told her weeks ago. They would estimate her IQ to be somewhere between 180 and 240, depending on her willingness to cooperate.

Time will prove however that the child's parents probably have drawn some premature conclusions. As she reaches her 3rd, 4th, and 5th birthday. she appears less and less remarkable. Mom and dad begin to have some nagging doubts about the new genius in their family. In fact, much of her behavior seems depressingly ordinary. She is often giddy, noisy, and characteristically childish in her manner.

But it's so hard for us to realize that a human being is valuable, has worth, regardless of the amount of intelligence he or she may possess. Recently I read of a father who finally realized this as he was going through adoption procedures for a baby.

"I realized," he said, "that I was inspecting and evaluating this child as if I were buying a new automobile. I was actually asking if this baby girl was qualified to become my daughter. I

suddenly comprehended that the infant lying there before me was a magnificent human creation, regardless of any flaws or disadvantages. She was the creation of God, who had given her an immortal soul, yet there I stood demanding a perfect child who could become a personal credit to me.

Too often we lack self-worth or self-esteem because we have judged ourselves and others by the wrong standards. Each human being has genuine worth, regardless of the shape of his or her nose or the size of the ears or the efficiency of the mind. Every human being is entitled to hold up his or her head, not in haughtiness and pride, but in confidence and security. That is why Jesus treated Zacchaeus the way in which he did and why he treated other people in the same way. This is the concept of human worth intended by God. How foolish for us to doubt our value or the value of others when God created us in his own image.

God's way of looking at human beings was made very clear more than 3000 years ago when Samuel was seeking a King for Israel. Samuel was about to select the tallest, the most handsome son of Jesse, but God told him he had chosen the wrong person. According to the Old Testament, God said, "Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, for the Lord sees not as you see. You look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks inward, on the person's intentions."

So, we are to treat ourselves and others as God treats us, as Jesus treated Zacchaeus, as persons have inner worth, regardless of physical attractiveness or other such attributes. And when we do this, we help persons themselves gain self-esteem, self-worth which is the most needed commodity. When a person has self-esteem, likes himself or herself, then that person can stand up to almost anything.

Sometime ago, John McKay, the football coach at the University of Southern California was interviewed on television, and the subject of his son's athletic talent was raised. At that time his son was a successful player on his dad's team. Coach McKay was asked to comment on the pride he must feel over his son's accomplishments on the field. His answer was impressive.

"Yes, I'm pleased that John had a good season last year. He does a fine job, and I am proud of him. But I would be just as proud if he had never played the game at all."

Coach McKay was saying, in effect, that his son's football talent is recognized and appreciated, but his human worth does not depend on his ability to play football. Thus, his son will not lose respect if the next season brings failure and disappointment. John's place in his dad's heart is secure, being independent of his performance. I wish every child could say the same. Amen.