Sunday, December 9, 1990
GIFTS THAT JESUS GIVES US (No. 2 in a Series: The Gift of Self-Esteem)
Luke 19:1-10

He began his life with a number of disadvantages. His mother was a dominating woman who found it difficult to love anyone. His father died when he was a young boy. He had no love, no affection, and no good examples to follow during those growing-up years. Other children had little to do with him. He felt rejected almost all the time. He was ugly, small, and scrawny in stature even when he was fully grown. He was poor, untrained, and unloved.

As an adult, the only employment he could find was working for the government that occupied his country — so he became a tax collector for the enemy. It gave him a sense of power and authority. Many people lived in fear of him, and he became rich. Yet deep down, he wasn't satisfied. Something was missing from his life. He had no close friends. No one even liked him.

So Zacchaeus was surprised when Jesus noticed him and even treated him as a person of worth. More than that, Jesus was going to be a guest in his home for a meal. That was the highest compliment anyone could give a person. Zacchaeus received from Jesus that day and in the days following the most priceless gift one can give — the gift of self-esteem. And he was by no means the only person who received that gift from Jesus. It is a gift that has been given by and through Jesus to countless others. I could've chosen dozens of other examples of individuals Jesus met, according to the gospel stories, who received from him that same priceless gift, and it's a gift that you and I can receive and give.

Before Zacchaeus met Jesus, he had been bitterly disappointed with who he was and what he represented. He was like many in our time, who, in a world that worships superstars, those who have lots of money, celebrities, and so-called beautiful people, look in the mirror for the signs of self-worth and are not happy with what they see. Like Zacchaeus, they have not been given the gift of self-esteem.

So important is this gift that many counselors, psychotherapists, and others who work with people and families say that in all such cases of people in trouble they have worked with, they found a lack of self-esteem or self-worth.

Every age poses its own unique threats to self-esteem. For example, I am convinced that senility and mental deterioration among some of our longer-living people in our time come from a growing awareness that they live in a world that worships youth, where wrinkles, gray hair, and backaches are matters of scorn, where their ideas are thought of as out of date and their continued existence a burden.

But if self-esteem is such a priceless gift, why do so many lack it? And what are some of the ways in which Jesus gives this gift, and what are some of the ways in which we can give it?

In the first place, many people lack self-esteem because, in our culture, we frequently evaluate human worth by false standards, which means not everyone is seen as worthy. Praise and admiration are reserved for those who seem to have the characteristics that society values most highly, and from a young age, children pick up clues that worthiness as a human being is connected with these attributes.

One of the most highly valued personal attributes in our culture is physical attractiveness, beauty, and glamour. Accordingly, the personal worth of a newborn baby may be anxiously evaluated by his or her parents as they examine the baby's body.

This distorted system of evaluating human worth according to physical attractiveness is widespread. I still remember some years ago when in Chicago, eight student nurses were viciously murdered. The following day, a news commentator was discussing the violent tragedy on the radio, and he said, "The thing that makes this tragedy much worse is that all eight of these young women were so attractive." He was implying that they were more valuable human beings because of their beauty. If one accepts that assumption, then the opposite is also true: the murders would've been less tragic if unattractive young women had been murdered, or perhaps if those killed had been 70 or 80 years of age.

Jesus knew and taught that all human beings are valuable as far as God is concerned, and thus he treated the handsome and not so handsome with equal respect. Cultural values are not God's values. God's love for you and me is not dependent on whether or not we are physically attractive.

A second personal attribute that 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 10 months ago, the child was completely helpless; now look at her. She is doing things a full six weeks before the average child; this child's a genius."

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. I would estimate her IQ to be somewhere between 160 and 190."

Time will prove, however, that the child's parents probably have drawn some premature conclusions. But it's so difficult for us to realize that a human being is valuable and has worth regardless of the amount of intelligence he or she may possess.

Recently, I was talking with a prospective father who finally realized this as he and his wife were going through adoption procedures for a child.

"I realized," he said, "that I was inspecting and evaluating a 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 creation, regardless of physical attributes or native intelligence. She was the creation of God, who had given her an immortal soul, yet there I stood demanding a perfect child according to my standards who could become a personal credit to me."

When people become adults in our culture, we many times evaluate their worth by the job they hold or by the amount of money they have or their ethnic background. Thus, too often we lack self-worth or self-esteem because we have judged ourselves and others by the wrong standards. According to our Christian faith, each human being has genuine worth because each one of us is created in the image of God. Our worth, therefore, has nothing to do with the shape of our nose, whether or not we are tall or short, or what number is assigned to our IQ.

That is why Jesus treated Zacchaeus the way he did and why he treated other people he met in the same way. In each case, Jesus gave the priceless gift of self-esteem.

Now let's look more specifically at some of the ways in which Jesus gave this priceless gift so that we also can give it to others.

As I read the stories of Jesus in the Gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, Jesus gave the priceless gift of self-esteem to others by consciously seeking out and finding the best in each person he met, and by seeing the best, he was able to help others see the best in themselves and to build on those strengths. In every person we meet, we can look for the best in that individual or the worst, and we usually find what we are looking for.

I believe that when Zacchaeus was growing up, his parents and others around him told him over and over again, "You'll never amount to much. You're a runt. Nobody's ever going to pay much attention to you." Until Jesus met Zacchaeus, no one had ever seen the best in him.

With Jesus, it was different. When he came to the place where Zacchaeus was in the tree, he looked up at him and said, "Zacchaeus, come down quickly, for I must stay at your house today. I'm going to eat at your table." It was the first time in a long time, if ever, that anyone had seen anything good in Zacchaeus. Others had seen only the tax collector, the cheat, the little man, the traitor.

People often fulfill the expectations we have of them. In an experiment conducted some years ago, the researcher spoke to the teachers prior to the opening of school in the fall. She named some of the children as "academic sprinters" who were most likely to achieve but made no comments about the other children in the classes. In reality, the children chosen as academic sprinters had been chosen at random and had previously shown no greater intellectual promise than the rest of the group.

However, those children who were labeled as having good intellectual potential fulfilled the prophecy. At the end of the year, when all the children were tested, they showed more evidence of intellectual gain and achievement.

Years ago, I came to know a man who had trouble thinking of himself as anything but a failure. Because of this, every time he began to be successful, he would get depressed. He seemed to feel more comfortable when things weren't going well. He said, "I've always thought of myself as a failure, and I guess I'm doing everything possible to make that come true."

As he remembered growing up, he also recalled how his dad would say to him over and over again, "You're a failure." When he brought home a report card that was not satisfactory, all he heard was, "You're a failure." When he lost his job as a paperboy, "You're a failure." Over and over again, his dad especially saw only the worst in his son — never the best. Soon the young man accepted the failure label and, in so doing, began to act out in his life the same role. It's no wonder he lacked self-esteem. He had never been given the gift of someone seeing the best in him.

Some years ago, I had the opportunity to visit a clinic that worked with severely retarded children. The clinic had a good staff, and they all did what they could to help the children who were brought to them. The staff was composed of social workers, pediatricians, psychologists, and nurses. I remember one staff member who especially impressed me and everyone else. No matter how severely impaired a child was, this person would always come up with some

suggestion that would build on the child's strengths, on what was best in that individual. He never focused on a child's weaknesses, a child's "couldn'ts," but always on a child's "coulds."

For example, he helped the rest of the staff understand that a severely retarded 8-year-old could probably be helped to learn to tie her own shoelaces if someone patiently worked with her. Another time, he helped the staff understand that if the parents of a 12-year-old boy would handle him differently, the boy could probably be toilet-trained and then attend school along with others. In each of these cases and more, it worked. As he helped others to begin to see the best in each child, those same children began to change and to develop some of those capabilities. In this way, he gave the priceless gift of self-esteem and helped others to also give the gift.

This Christmas, follow the example of Jesus by seeking and finding the best in each person you meet. In that way, you can give the priceless gift of self-esteem. This gift has already been given to you from God. God has created you to be a blessing. Amen.