Sunday, December 4, 2005
THE GIFT OF SELF-WORTH (No. 2 in an Advent Series: Gifts from Jesus)
Luke 19:1-10

He began his life with several disadvantages. His father was a domineering person who found it difficult to love anyone. His mother died when he was a young boy. He had no love, no affection, and no good role models in his life. He had no siblings or children as friends while growing up. He felt rejected and lonely most of the time. He considered himself to be unattractive, and even when fully grown, he was small in stature.

As an adult, the only job he could find was working for the government, which occupied his country. So he became a tax collector for the enemy. This made him feared and despised, but he became rich. Yet deep down, he was not satisfied. Something was missing in his life. He had been living in the ancient town of Jericho for many years but had no friends there.

One day, he heard that a man named Jesus was coming through his town. He didn't know much about this teacher, but rumors were that he was an unusually gifted person and a man who welcomed people who were considered outcasts by others. Maybe, just maybe, this teacher could help him.

Since Zacchaeus was a short man, he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to get a glimpse of Jesus. Much to his surprise, Jesus noticed him. Even more surprising, Jesus treated him as a person of worth. Jesus invited himself to Zacchaeus' home for a meal and conversation — the highest compliment anyone could give. Zacchaeus quickly climbed down to welcome Jesus.

The next sentence in the story is revealing because it still happens today, even in church congregations. "All who saw it began to grumble and said, 'He (Jesus) has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.'" Why is it that people today often don't want their Jesus to associate with outcasts? Church congregations like this one, and all others, are the "body of Christ" in today's world. Luke quotes Jesus at the end of this story: "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."

Although it wasn't Christmas, Zacchaeus received from Jesus that day the most precious gift one can give — the gift of self-worth. Jesus gave that gift to many people and continues to give it today. The gospel stories are filled with examples. This congregation, following Jesus' example, continues to give that gift to countless people. It's also a gift you as individuals can give.

Zacchaeus had been disappointed with himself and what he represented. He was like many people in today's world who, in a culture that worships superstars, celebrities, and the so-called "beautiful people," look in the mirror for signs of self-worth and are unhappy with what they see. Like Zacchaeus, they haven't been given the gift of self-worth.

In my library, I have dozens of books written by counselors and others who work with individuals and families. A common theme in these books is the lack of self-worth as the root of many problems people face.

For example, I am convinced that many older people today experience a loss of self-worth because they live in a culture that worships youth. In such a culture, wrinkles, gray hair, and backaches are seen as signs of decreasing value to society.

In other words, people can lack self-worth because today's culture measures human worth by false standards, causing people to see themselves as unworthy. Praise and admiration are reserved for those who seem to have the characteristics most highly valued by the culture. Thus, even young children pick up clues that worthiness is measured by these flawed standards.

For example, on Tuesday night, I was flipping through the television channels and came across the annual show "Barbara Walters Presents: The Ten Most Fascinating People of 2005." I do not know what criteria she used to make her selections. They certainly were not the ten most fascinating people to me. All were celebrities. As far as I could tell, the only person over 50 in the group was the No. 1 Most Fascinating Person in 2005 — Camilla Parker Bowles, the wife of Prince Charles of England.

In addition to being young, being a celebrity or royalty, one of the most highly valued personal attributes in today's culture is physical attractiveness. This distorted system of judging self-worth is widespread.

Years ago in Chicago, eight student nurses were murdered. The following day, a news reporter said, "What makes this tragedy worse is that all eight of these young women were so attractive." He implied they were more worthy human beings because of their beauty. If you accept that assumption, the opposite must also be true: the murders would have been less tragic if the victims had been less attractive or older.

Jesus lived and taught that all human beings have worth. He treated the handsome and the not-so-handsome with equal respect. Human worth is not based on whether you are physically attractive, youthful, or a celebrity.

Another personal attribute often used to measure a person's worth is intelligence. Shortly after examining their baby's ears, eyes, and nose for imperfections, many new parents begin looking for signs that they have a budding genius. And believe it or not, they seem to find it, especially with the first child.

As the child enters her second year, parents see evidence that their child is intellectually superior. "You wouldn't believe how she can think and reason!" they say. "She remembers things I told her weeks ago!" But time often proves that these conclusions are premature. The truth is, a human being has intrinsic worth, regardless of the amount of intelligence.

A friend of mine came to this realization during adoption procedures for a child. "I realized," he said, "that I was inspecting and evaluating the child as if I were buying an automobile. I was indirectly asking if this baby girl was qualified to be my daughter. Then I suddenly comprehended that the infant lying there was a magnificent creation, regardless of physical attractiveness or native intelligence. She was created in God's image and had an immortal soul. Yet I caught myself expecting a perfect child according to my standards so that she would be a personal credit to me."

Another false way of evaluating a person's worth is by the job they hold, the amount of money they have, or their ethnic background. As a result, too many people try to determine their self-

worth by these standards. It doesn't work. Zacchaeus was a wealthy man but lacked self-worth. Jesus knew this, which is why he treated him with dignity and respect. He saw through the false ways of determining self-worth.

Let's now examine some specific ways in which Jesus gave the gift of self-worth to people so that you can also give it to others.

As I read the stories of Jesus in the gospels, he helped people discover the best in themselves. He was the original "strength finder." By doing this, he helped others build on their strengths. You can do the same, and in doing so, you will be giving the gift of self-worth.

I am convinced that when Zacchaeus was growing up, people told him over and over again, "You'll never amount to much. People won't pay attention to you. You have no talent." Until he met Jesus, no one had ever seen the best in him. With Jesus, it was different. When Jesus came to the place where Zacchaeus was in the tree, he looked at him and said, "Hurry and come down." It was the first time in a long time that anyone had seen anything of worth in him. Others had only seen the tax collector, the cheat, the traitor.

People tend to fulfill the expectations you have of them, whether good or bad. In an experiment conducted some years ago, teachers were told that certain children were "academic sprinters" and would likely succeed. These children had been selected at random, with no prior indication of greater intellectual promise. But at the end of the year, these randomly chosen children showed more evidence of intellectual gain. The teachers, believing in their potential, had consciously sought out their strengths and helped them build on those strengths.

I once knew a man who always saw himself as a failure. Because of this, every time he began to succeed, he would sabotage himself. He was comfortable when things weren't going well. He said, "I've always thought of myself as a failure, and I seem to be doing everything possible to make that come true."

As he remembered his upbringing, he recalled how his father would repeatedly say, "You're a failure." When his report card didn't meet expectations: "You're a failure." When he lost his paper route: "You're a failure." Over and over again, his father saw the worst in him, never the best. Eventually, the young man accepted the label and began to act out the role in all areas of his life. He had never been given the precious gift of self-worth.

This Advent and Christmas season, give the precious gift of self-worth by following the example of Jesus and finding the best in each person. Give this gift especially to those individuals you have the most difficulty accepting — to those you and others have not welcomed. This gift has already been given to you by God, who created you to be a blessing to others. Amen.