Sunday December 4, 2005

THE GIFT OF SELF-WORTH

No. 2 in an Advent Series on Gifts from Jesus

Luke 19:1-10

He began his life with several disadvantages. His dad 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 sisters or brothers and no children as friends as he was growing up. He felt rejected and lonely most of the time. He considered himself to be ugly and he was small in stature even when fully grown.

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. It gave

him a sense of power and authority. People lived in fear of him and 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 a number of 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 the rumors were that he was an unusually gifted person and a man who welcomed people who were considered by others to be outcasts. Maybe, just maybe this teacher could help him.

Since Zacchaeus was a short man he ran ahead of

the crowd and climbed a tree so he could get a glimpse of Jesus. Much to his surprise, Jesus noticed him. Even more to his surprise, he was treated as a person of worth. He invited himself to the home of Zacchaeus so he could talk and eat with him. That was the highest compliment anyone could give a person, to be a guest in his home for a meal and conversation. Zacchaeus quickly climbed down to welcome Jesus.

The next sentence in the story is revealing because it also 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 even today don't want their Jesus and therefore their

church congregations to welcome sinners and 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 about Zacchaeus as saying, “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 and in the days following the most precious gift one can give—the gift of self-worth. Jesus gave that gift to many people and still gives the same gift today. The gospel stories are filled with examples. This congregation, following the example of Jesus, continues to give that gift to countless people. It’s also a gift you as individuals can give.

Before Zacchaeus met Jesus, he had been bitterly disappointed with himself and what he represented. He was like many people in today's world, who in a world that worships superstars, those who have lots of money, celebrities and so-called beautiful or fascinating people, look in the mirror for their signs of self-worth and are not happy with that they see. Like Zacchaeus, they have not 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 all of these books is the lack of self-worth as the basis of many of the problems people have.

Every age and every culture has its own threats to self-worth. For example, I am convinced that loss of self-worth for many longer-living people today, comes from an awareness that they live in a culture that worships youth, where wrinkles, gray hair, and backaches are signs of a person's decreasing value to society.

In other words, people can lack self-worth because in today's culture, human worth is measured by false standards which can cause people to see themselves as not being worthy. Praise and admiration are reserved for those who seem to have the characteristics which the culture values most highly. Thus from little on up, even young children pick up clues that worthiness as a human

being is connected with these false standards.

For example, on Tuesday night this past week I was flipping through the television channels and I happened onto a television show that has been produced annually for a number of years—"BARBARA WALTERS PRESENTS: The Ten Most Fascinating People of 2005." I do not know what criteria she used to make her selection. They certainly were not the ten most fascinating people to me. All were celebrities. In case you didn't know, the only person over 50 in the group as far as I could tell, was the No. 1 Most Fascinating Person in 2005—Camilla Parker Bowles, the wife of Prince Charles of England. One news reporter wrote: "This year's most fascinating person did not

change the world as we know it. She did not cure a disease or win the Nobel Peace Prize. What she did was to love someone with no demands, no deadline. She is warm, down-to-earth, unassuming and not what many would assume would fascinate a future king. And yet for 35 years, Prince Charles has been fascinated by her." Evidently, so has Barbara Walters.

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

I referred to this news story in a sermon some years ago, but it fits here as well. In Chicago, eight student nurses were murdered. The following day a news reporter was discussing this crime 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 worthy human beings because of their beauty. If you accept that assumption, then the opposite is also true. The murders would've been less tragic if unattractive young women or older women had been killed.

Jesus lived and taught that all human beings have worth. He treated handsome and not so handsome with equal respect. Cultural values are not

necessarily God's values. God's love for you is not based on whether or not you are physically attractive or youthful or a celebrity.

Another personal attribute which too often is used as a measure of a person's worth is intelligence. Shortly after examining their baby's ears, eyes, nose and other body parts for imperfections, most new parents begin looking for signs that they are the parents of a budding genius. Believe it or not, they seem to find it. This is especially true of your first child.

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.

A parent said to me, “Only ten months ago the child was completely helpless. Now look at her. She is doing things a full six weeks before the average child. Our child is a genius.”

As the child enters her second year, evidence mounts that she is intellectually superior. The same parent said, “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 160 and 180.”

Time will prove however that the child’s parents probably have drawn some premature conclusions. But it’s so difficult to realize that a human being has intrinsic worth regardless of the amount of

intelligence she possesses.

I was talking with a prospective father who all of a sudden 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 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 standing there expecting a perfect child according to my standards so that she would be a personal credit to me."

When individuals become adults in our culture, another false way of evaluating a person's worth is by the job they hold or by the amount of money they have or their ethnic background. As a result too many individuals try to determine their self-worth by one of these standards. It doesn't work very well. Zacchaeus was a wealthy man but lacked self-worth. Jesus knew this. That is why he treated him with dignity and respect. He saw through the false ways of determining self-worth.

Let's now examine more specifically some of the 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

gave the precious gift of self-worth to the people he met by discovering the best in each person he met. He was the original "strength finder." By doing this, he was able to help others discover the best, the strengths within them and then to build on them. In the people you meet you can do the same and you will be giving the gift of self-worth.

I am convinced that when Zacchaeus was growing up, his parents and others told him over and over again, "You'll never amount to much. People are not going to pay much 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 he came to the place where Zacchaeus was in the tree, he looked at him and said, "Hurry and

come down; for I must stay at your house today." 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, good or bad. In an experiment conducted some years ago, the researcher spoke to the teachers prior to the opening of school that fall. She named some of the children "academic sprinters." She said she could see already that these were the children most likely to succeed. She made no comments about the other children in the class. In reality, the children chosen as academic sprinters had been selected at random

and had previously shown no greater intellectual promise than the rest of the group. No one knew this except the researcher.

Those children who had been 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. The teachers in this experiment consciously looked for the best in those students and when they found it, they helped them to build on their strengths.

I once knew a man who had trouble in thinking of himself as anything but a failure. Because of this, every time he began to be successful, he would

become depressed. He appeared to be more 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 growing up, he 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 up to his parent's expectations, all he heard was, "You're a failure." When he lost his job as a paper boy, "You're a failure. Over and over again, his dad saw the worst in his son, never the best. Soon the young man accepted the failure label and in so doing began to act out the same role in all of 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 other people have not welcomed. This gift has already been given to you from God who created you to be a blessing to others. Amen.