

**Homily for the 100th Anniversary of the Dedication of St. James Church
Decatur**

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Reverend Fathers, Deacons, consecrated religious, dear brothers and sisters in Christ: When my predecessor, the Most Reverend James Ryan, dedicated this church one hundred years ago this very day, the new building, your history books say, was filled to its 500-seat capacity; I am happy to see so many of you this evening, some of whom, no doubt, are descendants of those first parishioners.

I thank you and Father Burnette for your hospitality and for your fidelity to Christ and to his Church these past many years. The course of time has brought many changes to this parish and you have remained anchored in the Eucharist, through which the Lord Jesus remains present with us always (cf. Matthew 28:20).

There is a line in your history books that I find particularly striking. Describing the many building projects you have undertaken over the years, it is said that “the parish was often in debt, but was never short of faith or faithful.” As we hear today of

the curious encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus, we are reminded of the fundamental purpose of a parish: the encounter with Jesus Christ.

When we were presented for Baptism, our parents were asked what they wanted of the Church for us. “Faith,” they answered. When asked what faith offers us, they answered, “Eternal life.” It is within the parish church that the promise of eternal life is ordinarily bestowed upon the faithful in the waters of Baptism.

Too often in our daily activities it seems we lose sight of this foundational question – What does faith offer you? - but Zacchaeus did not, even if he could not have formulated it so. Why else would he, a man of no little importance, have made himself look so foolish as to climb a tree only to “see who Jesus was” (Luke 19:3)? Being a man “small of stature,” he would not have been able to force his way through the crowd; what else could he do but climb a tree (Luke 19:3)? To a heart longing for the fullness of joy and peace, for eternal life, it seemed the only rational thing to do.

But why did Zacchaeus not simply look for another opportunity to see Jesus? Something compelled him to look upon Jesus at that very moment; he simply could not wait. He wanted

faith; he wanted eternal life; he wanted to be numbered a fellow citizen with the saints (cf. Ephesians 2:19).

Jesus, of course, knew the desire of Zacchaeus' heart; whereas so many of the crowd were simply there to see the spectacle of Jesus' passing through, Zacchaeus wanted to encounter Jesus, but he dared not force himself upon Jesus. As we celebrate the 100th anniversary of St. James church, we have much to learn from this little man.

First, finding himself overwhelmed, Zacchaeus ignored the crowd and made himself look foolish in his efforts to be near Jesus, to see him. There are many crowds which seek to overwhelm us today and to obscure the sight of Jesus. Saint Augustine reminds us:

The crowd laughs at the lowly, at people walking the way of humility, who leave the wrongs they suffer in God's hands and do not insist on getting back at their enemies... The crowd gets in the way and prevents Jesus from being seen. The crowd boasts and crows when it is able to get back what it owns. It blocks the sight of the one who said as he hung on

the cross, “Father, forgive them, because they do not know what they are doing” (Luke 23:34).¹

But Zacchaeus ignored the crowd and climbed the sycamore tree. When the crowd moves in between Jesus and us, will we allow the crowd to block our sight of the Lord, to keep us from following Him, or will we allow ourselves to look foolish as we strive to keep our eyes fixed on Him?

Here in this church each of us has the opportunity to encounter Jesus Christ, to look upon Him and learn from Him, week after week, day after day. Here we can – and should – follow the example of Zacchaeus. Again, St. Augustine says:

Let Zacchaeus grasp the sycamore tree, and let the humble person climb the cross. That is little enough, merely to climb it. We must not be ashamed of the cross of Christ, but we must fix it on our foreheads, where the seat of shame is. Above where all our blushes show is the place we must firmly fix that for which we should never blush.²

Let us not be afraid to appear foolish before men as we seek to follow Christ, remembering that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men” (I Corinthians 1:25).

Second, when Jesus invited himself to stay at his house, Zacchaeus “made haste” and “received him joyfully” (Luke 19:6). We might think the Lord somewhat rude in inviting himself, but, as Saint Ambrose says, “although Christ had not yet heard his voice of invitation, he has heard his good will.”³

Has the Lord heard our good will? In every celebration of the Eucharist, Jesus invites himself into the homes of our souls. He longs to dine with us, to converse with us, to know us, to lead us to eternal life through the conversion of our hearts. As we come to the Holy Mass, are our hearts joyful? Do we make haste to encounter the Lord in the Eucharist?

Third, when confronted with the sinfulness of his occupation, Zacchaeus generously made every effort to make things right and to more than repay those whom he may have cheated. For this foolhardy generosity, Zacchaeus is to be praised. As Maximus of Turin says:

From this, we understand that wealth is not a hindrance but a help to attaining the glory of Christ. While we possess it, we should not squander it on wild living but give it away for the sake of salvation. There is no crime in possessions, but there

is crime in those who do not know how to use possessions. For the foolish, wealth is a temptation to vice, but for the wise, it is a help to virtue.⁴

Today, then, as we celebrate the dedication of his house of God, let us ask the intercession of Saint James that each of us might “like living stones, let [ourselves] be built into a spiritual house” (I Peter 2:5). Following the example of Zacchaeus, let us be foolish in the eyes of the world but wise in the eyes of God and so come to eternal life.

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 174.3*. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Vol. III: Luke*. Thomas C. Oden, et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 291.

² Saint Augustine of Hippo, *Sermon 174.3*. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Vol. III: Luke*. Thomas C. Oden, et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 291.

³ Saint Ambrose of Milan, *Exposition on the Gospel of Luke 8.82*. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Vol. III: Luke*. Thomas C. Oden, et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 289.

⁴ Maximus of Turin, *Sermons 95-96*. In *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament Vol. III: Luke*. Thomas C. Oden, et al, eds. (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 2003), 291.