

House calls: Luke 19:1-10

by [Audrey West](#) in the [October 16, 2007](#) issue

Not long ago the local newspaper carried a story about a young couple traveling to visit relatives in a neighboring state. Having parked along the side of the road so the woman could nurse their baby, the man stretched his legs and admired the view of the river and a nearby bridge. Within minutes a state patrol car stopped to check out the scene. Running the man's name through the police database, the officer discovered a match with someone on a terrorist watch list; within minutes the man was in cuffs and his family detained. They were released more than four hours later after the list was found to be in error. "I knew what was going to happen," the man later told reporters. "It's not the first time I've been stopped because of the color of my skin." He had been a U.S. citizen for more than 20 years.

When fear locks us in a stranglehold, it is tempting to believe that all would be well if only we could organize the world into good people and bad ones. Like clutter-busters tackling a houseful of stuff, hoping to discard the things we no longer want, we tend to label individuals according to our stereotypes and place them into their proper categories: welfare moms, soccer moms, suburbanites, hunters, tree huggers, addicts, vegetarians, CEOs, teenagers, artists, foreigners, single parents, motorcyclists, gun owners, RV owners and so on. Depending on our particular contexts—and perhaps on the labels we choose for ourselves—each of the categories carries with it either a positive or negative assessment.

Society's labels place Zacchaeus into the latter group, at least from the perspective of the crowds that gathered that one day. He is a chief tax collector, reviled by those from whom he has extorted payment. He is a wealthy man, which means that much of the good news in Luke's Gospel is bad news for him. Jesus has even preached against the likes of Zacchaeus, pronouncing woes upon the rich, who have already received their reward. His occupation places Zacchaeus in the company of the greedy, like the man who wants to tear down his barns and build bigger ones in order to hoard his excess crops. Even the crowds recognize Zacchaeus as a sinner, no doubt with a capital S. They do not even give him a chance to tell how he is impoverishing himself by giving half of what he owns to the poor and using the rest

to pay back four times what he has gained by cheating.

Along comes Jesus. He halts the parade that is passing by the sycamore tree and looks up at Zacchaeus, thereby discarding the crowd's labels and compelling them to reassess their categories. By announcing a visit to Zacchaeus's house, Jesus forces the crowd to see this tax collector with new eyes. It is not a pretty sight, apparently, for they cannot stop grumbling about it, and about the fact that Jesus would stoop to sharing hospitality with such a person. Nonetheless, Jesus refuses to be bound by labels. Where they see a selfishness, Jesus sees welcome. Where they see an outsider, Jesus sees a member of the family. Where they see lost, Jesus sees found. Jesus knows the good and the bad truth about Zacchaeus; when the labels are stripped away, there can be no pretense. And still Jesus invites himself over for dinner. *Hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today.*

We live in a 120-year-old house not far from the historic center of our town. It is a pleasant neighborhood, with terrific neighbors: an artist, a social worker, a school principal, a lawyer, a nurse, an electrical engineer and two graduate students. If that were all anybody knew about the place, they might imagine a stately old home with oak paneling, crown moldings, lovely patina and nooks and crannies in the attic that might hold a hidden trunk of old letters. The reality is that nothing in the place is level or square. The electrical wiring includes a significant amount of knob and tube elements, meaning that we have to be careful about overloading the circuits. There is no oak paneling or crown molding. There are cracks in the ceiling; the front steps are crooked; the door needs painting. Spiders are more at home on the porch than we are, and they prove it almost every night by weaving intricate webs at face level. If Jesus were coming over for dinner, I would want time to clean the place, to make it look more tidy than it really is: if nothing else, to vacuum the dog hair, shoo the cats off the bookcase and sweep the spider webs away from the front door. I would want it to look like we keep a nice house, even if the reality is considerably different.

Zacchaeus has no time to beautify his place, no time to fix a special meal, no opportunity to make his home look like anything other than what it is. Jesus is coming for dinner. Today. Right now. The rejected tax collector is playing host to the redeeming Son of Humanity.

That is how salvation works. We do not have to put things in order first, because salvation is not about being neat and orderly. It is not about making things look good, not about what we do, not about fitting into the world's stereotypes; it's not

about the good or bad labels by which we are known to ourselves or others. Before even announcing his newfound spirit of generosity and restitution, Zacchaeus learns that Jesus is coming to see him. *Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost*

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