

Have you ever had your sense of what is right and wrong challenged?  
What did you do?

I loved what one British Airways flight attendant did. On a British Airways flight from Johannesburg a middle-aged, well-off South African lady found herself sitting next to a black man. She called a flight attendant over to complain about her seating.

"What seems to be the problem, Madam?" asked the attendant.

"Can't you see?" she said. "You've sat me next to a kaffir. I can't possibly sit next to this disgusting human. Find me another seat!"

"Please calm down, Madam," the attendant replied. "The flight is very full today, but I'll tell you what I'll do - I'll go and check to see if we have any seats available in club or first class."

The woman cocks a snooty look at the outraged black man beside her (not to mention many of the surrounding passengers). A few minutes later, the Stewardess returns with the good news, which she delivers to the lady, who cannot help but look at the people around her with a smug and self-satisfied grin: "Madam, unfortunately, as I suspected, economy is full. I've spoken to the cabin services director, and club is also full. However, we do have one seat in first class."

Before the lady has a chance to answer, the stewardess continues . . . "It is most extraordinary to make this kind of upgrade, however, and I have had to get special permission from the captain. But given the circumstances, the captain felt that it was outrageous that someone be forced to sit next to such an obnoxious person."

With that, she turned to the black man sitting next to the woman, and said: "So, if you'd like to get your things, sir, I have your seat ready for you . . ." At that point, the surrounding passengers stood and gave a standing ovation while the black gentleman was ushered up to the front of the plane.

I love how this flight attendant dealt with her sense of right and wrong. She was proactive about it. What about you? When your sense of right and wrong is challenged, what do you do? How do you respond?

In our scripture for today, Jesus challenges what the community around him sees as right and wrong. Jesus is walking through Jericho. And on his way he stops and looks at a man the rest of the community loves to hate.

He is Zacchaeus. He is rich. He isn't hated because he is rich. He is hated because he is seen as one who sold out to the enemy. He is a tax collector for the Romans. He is siding with those who are the occupiers of the holy land. His is hated because he has gotten rich off of his own people.

Zacchaeus is the ultimate outcast. He is outcast not because of an illness or something that has been done to him. He is not a victim of circumstances. He is an outcast, because he is seen to have walked away from God. He has chosen a lifestyle that is not honorable.

Don't you find it more difficult to like people who make bad choices for their life? Don't you find it more difficult to welcome people you know have screwed up? Isn't it easier sometimes just to say, "Well, they have to lie in the bed they have made?"

I do.

Jesus challenges me here. Because while I am content to say to another, "Well, that is a choice you have made. You will have to live with the consequences of that choice." I will often, at least in my mind, begin to write off the other person.

But Jesus doesn't do that in this passage. While he clearly is aware of who Zacchaeus is, he stops and offers Zacchaeus a chance, he offers him a shot. He says, "I am going to stay at your house today."

And that offer of welcome and hospitality is what makes all of the difference in the world for Zacchaeus.

What I am realizing is that offer of welcome and hospitality makes all the difference in the world for any of us who have ever felt like we are on the outside looking in. That offer of welcome and hospitality has the strength to change our lives just as surely as it changed Zacchaeus' life so

long ago. When you and I can choose to live in a way that welcomes others, we open the door for them to experience the love and grace of God, that very love and grace which can change lives.

What I want to invite you to do today is to think about what can you do to personally welcome others into your life? What can you do to welcome others who come to worship here?

One of the things we can do is we can talk with service people as if they are real people. We can engage them. We can tell them we like a ring they are wearing or a shirt they are wearing. We can ask them about them.

When we are walking down a street or down a hall way at work, we can actually look at people and smile at them. We can even say hello to them.

When we are here at church, where we gather with all of our friends, we can look around when we find our seat. If we see someone we don't know in worship we can say hello to them. We can introduce ourselves to them, simply by saying, "Hello, my name is Scott" . . . Usually people will even be polite and introduce themselves back to you. You can then follow that up by saying to them, something like, "Are you new here?"

Often times you will find yourself meeting another member of the church. And that is okay, even if they have been members for 50 years. Think of yourself as gaining a new friend.

What studies tell us is that new people leave church pretty quick, within three minutes of worship ending. If you can take the first three minutes following worship to greet and welcome, you will have plenty of time to greet your friends. And those who are guests with us on that day will leave, most likely feeling that they have been genuinely welcomed.

And that increases the chance that they will return again to worship with us.

Welcoming others matters. It mattered for Zacchaeus. It matters for each of us. And when we welcome, it might not only change others, but it just might change us too!

Once there was a young mother taking a course in sociology. The class was assigned to go out and smile at three people and document their reaction.

The next day, she and her family were in a McDonald's on a cold, clear morning. She writes, "We were standing in line, waiting to be served, when all of a sudden everyone around us began to back away, and then even my husband did. I did not move an inch. An overwhelming feeling of panic welled up inside me as I turned to see why they had moved. As I turned around I smelled a horrible, body odor smell, and there standing behind me were two poor, homeless men."

One of them smiled up at her, looking for acceptance. The second man fumbled with his hands, obviously mentally deficient and totally dependent on his friend. They had a handful of coins and bought only coffee because that was all they could afford. They had to buy something in order to sit down where it was warm.

Acting on impulse, she bought two extra breakfasts and took them to the table where the men sat, "I put the tray on the table and laid my hand on the blue-eyed gentleman's cold hand. He looked up at me, with tears in his eyes and said, "thank you." I leaned over began to pat his hand and said, "You're welcome. God wanted me to tell you that you are loved."

The man said, "Thank you."

She walked away, thanking God for the chance to offer food. She walked away thanking God for the chance to see these homeless men as people, real people, not just someone she should easily dismiss as she had in the past.

It is my hope that we can find a way to welcome and to care for those around us. It is my hope that we can allow Jesus to continue to challenge us to welcome others, even those that some would want to reject.

In the hope Jesus offers us,

Amen