

CIVILIZE IT



DIGNITY BEYOND THE DEBATE

2020

Pastoral Aid: Loving our Neighbors through Civil Dialogue

The Story of Zaccheus

Introduction:

- As we experience the intensifying debate and personal attacks during election season, we might feel overwhelmed. We may even fear having a conversation with some members of our communities or families because we do not know if they will share our viewpoints and are afraid the conversation will become hurtful or painful.
- The Gospel story of Zaccheus tells us “the Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost.” What could be more in need of saving than our current political dialogue in this country? The incivility we experience in the public sphere and in our own conversations is certainly evidence of our sinfulness, which separates us from God and others, as we fail to recognize the human dignity of our neighbors. Our communities need healing.
- It might be helpful to know that in concert with other Christian denominations, the Catholic church across the country has decided to call for civility—in our families, our parishes and workplaces, and even by public figures who seek to win our votes. The USCCB, joined by many dioceses, is implementing a campaign called “Civilize It: Dignity beyond the debate.”
- The campaign is an opportunity for individuals and communities to recommit to honoring human dignity in our conversations. We need to replace the often vitriolic language used in our political landscape with words that evoke love and respect.
- The Scripture passages below remind us about the primacy of human dignity and God’s love for each of us. Our human dignity is central to our identity as followers of Christ and must inform how we put our faith into action.

“May you be sowers of hope,
builders of bridges and agents of
dialogue and harmony.”

- Pope Francis,
Message during Apostolic Journey,
April 29, 2017



- In the reading from the Gospel of Luke, we see Zaccheus have a change of heart AND a change in his actions due to his experience with Jesus. How can we better make our actions, thoughts, and words reflect our experience with Jesus?

Wisdom 11:22-12:2

- The Book of Wisdom provides a reflection on God's love for his people, even during times of trial.
- In this chapter, the writer is speaking specifically about how God protected the Israelites during their exodus from Egypt. God's love for the Israelites is central to this narrative and reminds us that just as God's spirit dwelled in them, it dwells in each person today. It is from this understanding that we recognize the very presence of God in all our brothers and sisters.
- How do our actions, including our treatment of our neighbors, especially those with whom we disagree, reflect the reality of God's profound love for each of us? Where do we fall short? In our public life, how do we bear witness to those around us to the true dignity of each person?
- The book of Wisdom tells us to: "rebuke offenders, little by little." How do we engage others in conversation, knowing that being in relationship with someone in need of correction can help open his or her heart? How can we keep a conversation open instead of closed? In addition to treating others with dignity ourselves, we also have an obligation to invite others to do the same. When we hear a family member, friend, or colleague disparaging someone else's dignity, we are called to invite him or her to consider how he or she can love instead. Sometimes this may involve much patience and many conversations over time to help friends or families recognize why particular language is not respectful of others' dignity.

Luke 19: 1-10

- The story of Zaccheus is well known. Zaccheus is very interested in Jesus. Enough to climb a tree in order to just see him!
- However interested he may have been previously, Zaccheus doesn't commit to mending his ways until after his encounter with Jesus.
- Jesus calls Zaccheus down from the tree and in the interaction that follows, Zaccheus is transformed. He changes his sinful ways (over-collecting taxes) and gives half of his (probably considerable) wealth to the poor.
- It is in this interaction that we see Jesus truly winning over the heart of Zaccheus through love and companionship. Jesus asks to stay at Zaccheus' house. What a gift and example of accompaniment!
- Zaccheus also seems to offer an excellent example of the power of acknowledging one's sins and seeking reconciliation. Through his encounter with Jesus, he chooses to work towards repairing the harm he has done by paying back more than what he had taken unfairly from citizens.



- Zaccheus is open to God's love in his encounter with Jesus AND allows himself to be moved to action. He even makes a difficult choice with seeming ease.
- The story of Zaccheus, is a great example of the power of relationships. Jesus encounters Zaccheus and gives him an invitation to openness and repentance. Jesus does not admonish Zaccheus, but first befriends him, accompanying Zaccheus in this moment in time. After establishing a relationship, an invitation to conversion follows. Were words exchanged? Perhaps or perhaps not. But the result of their interaction was an experience of conversion in which Zaccheus proclaims, "Behold, half of my possessions, Lord, I shall give to the poor, and if I have extorted anything from anyone I shall repay it four times over."
- We are all sinners and have broken our relationships with others through our actions. In Zaccheus' case, over-collecting taxes. In our case, through the way we might choose to dismiss, or even act disrespectfully towards those with whom we disagree.
- Jesus shows us that relationship is key to respecting the dignity of all people. Jesus focuses on the person of Zaccheus, and in that interaction, Zaccheus is transformed. We are all called to that transformation through our relationship with Jesus. His love for Jesus calls him to both a conversion of heart and a conversion of actions.
- Jesus invites each of us to that conversion, he invites us to let him into our homes, and his presence will illuminate in our hearts the ways we have failed to love others in our hearts, our interactions, and our ways of relating with those with whom we disagree.

Application

- The kind of loving, public interaction with someone who is different demonstrated by Jesus with Zaccheus seems to be completely missing from this era in history.
- This very type of conversion is what is needed for our country at this time. As Catholics, we can hear Jesus's call to conversion of our own hearts and conversion of our actions. Instead of lamenting the state of very uncivil dialogue, we can do something about it. We can put our faith into action.
- As Catholics, we know that political engagement is a virtue. We cannot simply turn away from the debate. We are called to informed participation. So what are we called to do?
- With the *Civilize It!* campaign, Catholics are called see the "dignity beyond the debate." We can make room in our own hearts for civil dialogue, which assumes a posture of understanding and a commitment to honoring one another's dignity.
- While we may not hold all opinions or viewpoints as valid, we can create room in our hearts to hear from those with whom we disagree. We can commit to seek understanding before we seek to be understood. We can create a space where human dignity is the start of the conversation.



- *Civilize It* is in concert with Christians from other denominations around the country, who are engaged in a year-long commitment to hearing the call to be so moved by our relationships with Jesus that we act with charity and love towards others. *Civilize It* is the Catholic version of a wider campaign.

- The Civilize It Campaign is also about practical steps that we can take to help our communities honor the dignity of all people. Here are some examples:

- o Take the Civilize It Pledge and learn more about civil dialogue at civilizeit.org. The pledge invites all people to commit to:

- Civility, clarity, and compassion

- o Commit to engaging in dialogue with those closest to you. This might be difficult, but approaching others from a posture of understanding and focused on human dignity, we can overcome the assumptions we hold of one another and deepen our relationships.
- o Look for opportunities to engage in civil dialogue in our community. During this election season, could you commit to learning more or participating in ONE event that advances civil dialogue?

- How can you take the example of Zaccheus and allow Jesus' love for you to stir you to conversion and action? I encourage you to learn more about what civil dialogue is and how you can participate. Together our commitment to human dignity and to sharing Christ's love can help shift the climate of hatred and vitriol to one of love and respect.

Tips for Engaging in Civil Dialogue:

1. Listen first and seek to understand the whole picture.
2. Ask questions for clarification.
3. Use 'I' statements; pay attention to body language.
4. Listen to what feelings are present and pay attention to how you respond.
5. Summarize what you've heard and ask for feedback.



Sample Prayers of the Faithful to include:

We pray for our leaders, those seeking to be leaders and those already elected.

May they have the experience of being a beloved child of God and allow that love to transform their words and actions towards love and respect for all people.

We pray for our communities.

May we seek understanding first and listen attentively to those who disagree with us, seeking to be examples in all settings of the love Jesus shared with Zaccheus.

We pray for our Church.

May the love of Christ that we know guide and direct our actions and words over the next year so that we may live out the Jesus's example to love each person.

Bulletin Announcement:

Engage in civil dialogue. Join Civilize It: Dignity beyond the debate

As Catholics, we have a long tradition of engagement in the political process as a means of putting our faith into action. Today, however, vitriolic rhetoric fills the public square. Join fellow Catholics in calling for all people to honor each other's dignity by engaging in respectful dialogue. Take the pledge and find helpful resources at CivlizeIt.org.

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