

**JANUARY 22, 2012 HOMILY
AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH**

LUKE 19: 1-10

“LITTLE PEOPLE”

Today’s gospel reading from Luke 19 is the well-known story of Zaccheaus. He was a little short guy---so short he had to climb up a tree in order to see Jesus over the crowd. Such a short little man, he probably had been teased a lot during his life. And it probably made him a bitter and angry fellow. And then he became a tax collector for the Roman Empire, the enemy of the Jewish people. As a tax collector, he would have been seen as a traitor as well as a crook, overcharging the people and keeping the extra money for himself. That sure didn’t make him any more popular! It did make him rich, but other than having money he was a miserable man. He was wealthy, but still down and out in every other way. He was a “little person”, not only in physical height---a “little person” who needed help. So Jesus helped him. The Lord became His friend, which no one else would do. The Lord led him to repentance. Jesus saved his soul. Zaccheaus totally changed and gave away his dishonestly gained money to the poor. He became a follower of Christ. And Tradition tells us he later became a bishop and we know he became a Saint. Jesus changed him from a bitter and hated and hateful man into a Saint.

Jesus loved little people, He loved the down and out, He loved those needing help. And He helped them.

Today, January 22, is Human Life Sunday in our Orthodox churches and in churches of many other Christian traditions. The focus today is on little people, people a lot littler than Zaccheaus. The focus is on babies, the littlest and most helpless people of all. And especially today we focus on the little people, the little babies, who need our help.

Some of these littlest people need our help even before they’re born. Today is Human Life Sunday because 39 years ago today, the Supreme Court legalized abortion in America. The womb should be a safe place for a baby but that’s not always so. Abortionists invade the womb to kill the baby inside. Not that this never happened before, but 39 years ago it was made legal, which means it’s much more common than before.

Jesus Christ helped little people. As His people, we should do the same. So we must help and protect these helpless littlest people, the unborn children.

For we Orthodox, this isn’t the first time we’ve been through this particular struggle. Abortion was quite accepted and common in ancient times. It was the early Church, our Orthodox spiritual ancestors, who struggled to change the world and get people to quit killing their infants. With God’s help, the Orthodox Christians back then won that struggle and changed the world—and abortion was outlawed and went way down in frequency. Hopefully, we, along with others who believe like us, can win out again and change society and its laws again. But even if we can’t win in that way, we still must help the babies, the little people. We must try to persuade mothers to let their children live. We can do that one by one. We can do that through groups, crisis pregnancy centers, etc. We can do that through our own Orthodox group, ZOE For Life. We must do all we can, in the big picture of society as a whole, and right down with individual people, to make the womb a safe place again so the little people can be born.

And we should also help after birth. We often call the birth of a baby a “blessed event.” And,

of course, it certainly is that. But there can be another side to a new baby for those in crisis pregnancies----the crisis may be a birth out of wedlock, it may be poverty, it may be health problems. Lots of times, having a child is very hard, indeed, on the parents. The baby, in a sense, is not always the only “little person”. The parents may be pretty “little”, too: needing help.

And so we should help after birth, too----help the baby and help the parents. That’s why we have ZOE For Life, the Orthodox agency that does just that. That’s why we’re having a baby shower today for the “little people” they help. And you yourself may have a relative, a neighbor, a fellow parishioner you know, involved in a tough situation like this. Don’t reject or ignore them, but reach out and help.

We need to be a parish family that helps little people, whether they be in our parish or outside of our parish. Some may need food or clothing. Some may need friendship. There may be a woman considering abortion that we can try to persuade otherwise. There may be a woman who has had abortion that we need to reach out to with love.

Whatever the particular need may be, when someone needs our help, it is the same as Jesus Christ needing our help. In Matthew 25, Christ describes Judgment Day. He says in that gospel chapter that when we help the needy, the hungry, etc., we are actually helping Him.

In the 1800’s a monastery in Russia received many important visitors-----nobility, generals, members of the royal family, etc. They would come to pray, to get advice, to make generous donations. The monks would get very excited about such important visitors but after some years the monks noticed that the abbot no longer got excited at all by such visits. They asked the abbot why? He replied that only one kind of visitor now excited him----that was when beggars came to the monastery gates seeking help. The abbot said that excited him because “that person is Jesus Christ coming to visit.” (in “Christianity Today”, March, 2005)

Hopefully, our parish can get a reputation as the kind of place that is good to go to for people needing help. A good place for little people. Something like this, I hope----“Do you need food? Go to St. Matthew’s. Are you lonely? Go to St. Matthew’s? Have you gotten in some kind of trouble? Go to St. Matthew’s. They’ll help you.” May God grant this.

Zacchaeus climbed a tree so he could see Jesus. He wanted to see Jesus because he needed help, being such a miserable fellow. Jesus had a reputation---he would help. May we, as Christ’s followers, have that same reputation.

Today is an interesting combination of dates----January 22, Human Life Sunday, and Zacchaeus Sunday in our Orthodox Church. Both are about little people. Zacchaeus isn’t the only little person. Infants, and the women carrying them, are also little people when they need help.

Three things we should do to help these little people----

1. Try to convince mothers to let their babies be born.
2. Help those in tough situations who do let their babies be born----help them after the birth in any way we can.
3. Help those who tragically decide to not let their babies live---bring them back to God for forgiveness, and help them in any way we can.

Zacchaeus was rejected by everyone, except Christ. As Christ helped little Zacchaeus, so may we, as Christ’s Church, help the little people among us and around us.

The “Didascalia” is a collection of instructions and rules for the ancient Christians in Syria.

One direction given there is particularly interesting. Apparently, it reflects the situation in the Orthodox congregations in the years after Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire in the early 300's A.D. In the decades that followed legalization, the persecuted Christians could now build church buildings and Christianity became very popular. The new churches were packed out and many of the "important people" started coming to church. Some bishops in Syria were doing something that the other bishops didn't like at all. If a liturgy was underway and the church was packed out and then an important and/or wealthy person came in late looking for a place in the already full building, some bishops would temporarily stop the liturgy. They would go and greet the important visitor and find him a good spot in the church. The councils of bishops forbade this practice. There should be no interruption of the services or special treatment of important visitors. But, the councils said, if the bishop noticed a poor man coming into the church, he should bring the poor man to his bishop's throne. Then he should have the poor man sit on the throne and he, the bishop, should sit on the floor! (in *Atheist Delusions*, David Bentley Hart, Yale University Press, 2009, p. 170)

May we have a similar attitude towards "little people" as did those Syrian Christians, our spiritual ancestors. Someone needs our help---as Christ says in Matthew 24, that means that person is Christ come to visit us. Let us treat that little person accordingly. Whoever needs our help---whether a miserable man like Zaccheaus, a homeless person needing food, a mother and baby in a crisis pregnancy; whoever it is, let us be like our Lord Jesus Christ and help the little people.

