

31st Sunday of Ordinary Time

[Greg Kandra](#)

[Lectionary 153:](#)

[Wis 11:22-12:2](#)

[Ps 145:1-2, 8-9, 10-11, 13, 14](#)

[2 Thess 1:11-2:2](#)

[Luke 19:1-10](#)

Possible preaching themes:

- From Wisdom: **God's Love and Mercy** Extend to All
- From the Gospel: The **Science of Smallness** and Giving Dignity to Those "Small in Stature"
- From the Gospel: **Seeing Jesus** — and Being Seen by Jesus

Possible scientific resources:

- **On mercy**
 - The Psychology of Mercy
<https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286624821> [Forgiveness and mercy A psychological approach](#)
 - Forgiveness, Mercy and the Prodigal Son
<https://www.rejoicecounseling.com/forgiveness-mercy-and-the-prodigal-son-bridging-theology-with-psychology/>
 - The power of mercy podcast <https://hiddenbrain.org/podcast/the-power-of-mercy/>
- **On being small of stature**
 - The Psychiatric Aspects of Dwarfism
<https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/abs/10.1176/ajp.133.2.160?journalCode=ajp>
 - Dwarfism: Symptoms and Causes <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/dwarfism/symptoms-causes/syc-20371969>
 - Short and Tall Soldiers May Face Increased Depression Risk
<https://www.livescience.com/47174-military-height-depression-risk.html>
 - Height, Social Comparison and Paranoia
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165178113007774>
 - Falling Short: On Implicit Biases and the Discrimination of Short Individuals https://opencommons.uconn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1432&context=law_review

- **Seeing and perception**
 - Perception: Seeing is not believing podcast
<https://insidepersonalgrowth.com/podcast-762-perception-seeing-is-not-believing-with-james-and-steph-purpura/>
 - Looks can deceive: why perception and reality do not always match up
<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/looks-can-deceive/#>
 - Optical illusions show how we see (Tedtalk)
https://www.ted.com/talks/beau_lotto_optical_illusions_show_how_we_see?language=en

Homily outline:

- **Introduction: Meeting Zacchaeus, “Short in Stature”**
 - This Gospel introduces us to one of the more unusual characters in scripture, the wealthy tax collector Zacchaeus.
 - He is the only one identified in the Gospels explicitly by his physical stature; Luke reports that Zacchaeus had trouble seeing Jesus because he was “short in stature,” so he climbed up a sycamore tree for a better view.
 - Zacchaeus’s size could be perceived a symbolic reflection of his status in the community — the “smallness” mirroring in some ways the popular perception of tax collectors as sinful, greedy men.
 - Yet the first reading, from Wisdom, about the Lord valuing even the smallest grain, challenges us to think differently about what is happening in this event.
 - Does his size reflect another aspect of his life?
- **The science of smallness**
 - Researchers have found some common psychological characteristics among men who are “short in stature.”
 - One study among soldiers found men at both extremes, very short or very tall, can have serious problems of self-esteem <https://www.livescience.com/47174-military-height-depression-risk.html>. They may suffer from depression or anxiety.
 - Research has found similar results among people suffering from dwarfism, with men often experiencing “emotional distress.”
<https://ajp.psychiatryonline.org/doi/abs/10.1176/ajp.133.2.160?journalCode=ajp>
 - One experiment using virtual reality found reducing a person’s height can even give a feeling of paranoia and mistrust
<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165178113007774>
 - According to several studies, beyond feeling a diminished sense of self, people who are shorter than average also face social diminishment. The Connecticut Law Review found significant instances of “height discrimination,” and a lack of legal action to solve the problem.

https://opencommons.uconn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1432&context=law_review

- All this suggests that in Zacchaeus we are encountering a (very short) figure who confronted a (very long) list of social, psychological and moral challenges. All of which helped make him the man who was spotted by Jesus watching from atop a tree — a complicated figure who, perhaps, was also a victim of his own biology.

- **The response of Christ**
 - Tellingly, Jesus speaks to Zacchaeus before Zacchaeus says anything to him; Christ notices someone who has likely spent his life been overlooked.
 - Jesus invites himself into Zacchaeus's world, and into his home. The first response of the crowd is that Jesus has aligned himself with a tax collector a sinner.
 - However, Christ's response says something more: "This man too is a descendant of Abraham." Jesus affirms that this someone who had been shunned and (literally) looked down on has status, dignity, stature, worth.
 - Zacchaeus, for his part, "comes down quickly" and receives Jesus with joy. He expresses contrition and pledges to give to the poor and says if I have extorted anything from anyone, I shall repay it four times over."
 - He realizes he is worthy of Christ's time and attention. Jesus announces that the "Son of Man has come to seek and to save what was lost."

- **The Takeaway: Honoring the Outcast with Dignity and Respect**
 - As he did so often, Jesus makes time for and gives attention to those on the margins — in this case, a man literally looked down upon and, in this episode, hidden in the branches of a tree.
 - Zacchaeus was also a man who was considered a sinner — seen as sinful and unscrupulous. We turn again to the first reading, from Wisdom: "Before the Lord the whole universe is as a grain from a balance or a drop of morning dew come down upon the earth." To God, even the smallest measure matters; the insignificant is significant. He "loves all things that are."
 - Mercy and forgiveness are linked. From a psychological perspective, forgiveness can be considered a special form of mercy which is a more general concept reflecting kindness, compassion, or leniency toward a transgressor https://www.researchgate.net/publication/286624821_Forgiveness_and_mercy_A_psychological_approach
 - What are aspects of life that make us feel small? Unimportant? Insecure? Jesus sees what others often miss and reaches out to them to help them feel included and embraced extending not only forgiveness but also the mercy and kindness that allows Jesus to invite himself into Zacchaeus' own house.

- This event carries a message of mercy, outreach, and hope — no sin is too great, no person too insignificant in the eyes of God. Every person has dignity and is worthy of respect and, when called for, mercy.

Tags: dwarfism, marginalized, mercy, psychology

About the Preaching with the Sciences Initiative

A primary way Roman Catholics explore their faith and nourish their spirituality is by participating in Sunday Mass and actively engaging in the homily. However, few preachers explicitly connect faith or spirituality with science. The Preaching with the Sciences initiative, made possible by a generous grant from the John Templeton Foundation, gathers scientists and leading homileticians to explore the positive contributions science can make to preaching, and consequently contribute to more contemporary modes of believing. Such contributions are grounded in the rich imaginations that scientists bring to their work as well as in scientific discoveries that have a potential for revealing religious truths and even shedding new insight on ancient teachings and beliefs.

With guidance from world-renowned scientists with differing areas of expertise, a select number of homileticians will draft homily outlines for preaching key Sundays and feast days across the 3-year lectionary cycle. Over 100 homily outlines will highlight some of the way's sciences and the contemporary search for religious meaning can interface. These free homiletic resources have the potential to influence thousands of preachers seeking help each week in crafting sermons and helping to shape a scientifically informed religious imagination among future preachers.