

- To St. Luke chapter 19, reading from the first verse. St. Luke's gospel chapter 19, from verse one. "And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And behold there was a man named Zacchaeus, which was the chief among publicans, and he was rich. And he sought to see Jesus who he was, and could not for the press, because he was little of stature. And he ran before and climbed up into a Sycamore tree to see him. For Jesus was to pass that way. And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and saw him, and said unto him, 'Zacchaeus, make haste and come down, for today I must abide at thy house.' And he made haste and came down and received Jesus joyfully. And when they saw it, they all murmured saying, 'Jesus has gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner.' And Zacchaeus stood and said unto the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have taken anything from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold.' And Jesus said unto him, 'This day, a salvation come to this house, for so much as he also is a son of Abraham. For the son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost.'" The Lord blessed to us, this reading of his holy Word, and to his name, be the glory and the praise. Amen. (bright worship music) In the name of God the father, God the son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen. The usual procedure for a Monday, Thursday communion meditation, would be to speak quite directly to the historical episode of the last supper which Jesus had with his disciples, a short time before his death. But the last supper Jesus did have with his disciples, is quite organically related to all the rest of his public ministry. In as much as the last supper sums up within itself, Jesus' entire life as a life of constructive self-giving, the shadow of the cross looms over that supper as indeed the shadow of the cross looms over the whole story of Jesus. It may therefore not be inappropriate for us tonight to turn to another gospel episode for our communion meditation. And so I take as my text, Luke's gospel chapter 19 verse seven. "And all the people murmured saying, Jesus is gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner. Jesus is gone to be guest, with a man that is a sinner." They meant, of course, that he had gone to lodge for the night at the house of this notorious little fellow in Jericho, by the name of Zacchaeus. In the course of his public ministry, Jesus encountered many enemies. And his enemies at one time and another, tried to demean him or defame him by leveling slanderous accusations against him. But the ironical thing in the gospel records, is that while indeed their only intention is to demean him, his enemies often speak about him without knowing it, words that are profoundly and ever lastingly true. So it is here in the story of Jesus' visit with Zacchaeus in Jericho, his Pharisean enemies declare of him, this man Jesus, just think of it, they say to the other folks in the city, this man, Jesus he's gone to be guest with a man that is a sinner. As if he couldn't have chosen some of the good churchy people in Jericho. Some of the Pharisees, for example. You see, Zacchaeus had the meanest reputation in all Jericho, as a sheer mischief of a man. He was a tax collector for the Romans for one thing, and worse than that, he had gotten rich. Yet, Jesus had chosen this rascal, with whom to lodge. This dyed in the wool rogue, in the eyes of his respectable fellow citizens. And so Jesus' enemies declared of him, look at him, he's gone to stay with the meanest sinner in all Jericho. Well, Jesus enemies didn't know it then, but they were saying something that was true about Jesus of Nazareth then, and is true about him forever and forever. He can only lodge with the despised, and the rejected and the outcast. He cannot make his dwelling place anywhere else. He is most at home with the nobodys. He goes to live in the most unexpected of places, among the sinners. Not among the self righteous, or the pious, or the respectable. And at this point,

Jesus' whole message matches his conduct perfectly. For I believe, that the very heart of Jesus teaching throughout the gospels, is that God is standing in his mercy, not toward the self righteous at all, not toward those who pride themselves in their good works, but to the sinners who recognize their need, and really want him to come to stay with them. This is what Jesus means, when he says to his Pharisean enemies, in a way most calculated to wound their pious sentiments. "The harlots go into the kingdom of God before you." The same thing is true in that devastating parable of the Pharisee and the publican. It is once again, not the virtuous or self righteous Pharisee who is justified, but the tax gatherer who declares himself a sinner before God. And the same thing is true again, in the parable of the prodigal son, where the older brother represents the Pharisean type of piety. And the truth of that parable is, that God is turning in his mercy with open arms to receive of the prodigals coming back from their far countries. The messianic banquet is prepared for all sinful folk. The candles are lit, the tables are spread, and you can see them coming back from their far places, where they had wallowed in their sin, and God is running so to speak, to meet them. Jesus conduct and his message, correspond exactly to each other. And it's all very well summed up here in what he does in Jericho. He mixes with this particular nobody. And the question for us tonight before this holy table is, do we want such a Lord as this who mixes with the nobodys and only comes to lodge with the sinners? Or would we rather have another kind of Lord, higher up on the scale, as men judge things. Before this question of what kind of Lord we really want, we are summoned tonight, to learn a fresh, that the gospel is not really a very sweet and pleasant story. Certainly the last supper which Jesus had with his disciples, was not a nice fellowship meal, for it was portentous with destiny, and with death. Of course, you and I, in our very human way, would like to make the gospel story very sweet. We make our stucco crosses in the advent season very shining white, don't we? And we gild our crosses in our chapels and churches, and we try to make it look all very beautiful and smooth and comfortable. But the story of Jesus really at the bottom, has a very bitter taste. It tastes as bitter as gall. And it does so precisely because, Jesus goes lower than the lowest people. He goes down into the dark depths of existence, among the forgotten, the despised, the scorned, the rejected. Close to the end of his life, he will gather with a very ordinary group of men, and make the common stuff of bread and wine, symbols of his coming death on Golgotha. And at the very end, he will end up on the highest lowest place of all, crucified on a cross between two common criminals. And the question for us tonight before this holy table, is do we want such a Lord as this who stoop so low, or should we rather have another? I remember in 1940 standing in my native village in Ayrshire, Scotland, some 20 miles from the city of Glasgow, at the time when German bombers were coming over to unload their grizzly cargo on Clydebank. And as we stood there at a safe distance watching the night sky lit up in vivid tongues of flame, and hearing the awful crackling of the falling bombs. I remember what we had been taught since childhood, as I looked up into the night sky. Surely, beyond the skies and beyond the stars, there must live a gracious father. And I recall very vividly here in this pulpit now, saying to myself that very moment, "To hell with such a father. I don't desire him. I want rather a God who is not beyond the stars, but who is down where the bombs are falling, in the dirty places from which men would rather turn away their eyes." And I hope tonight before this holy table, we can all say the same thing again. Remembering that Jesus and the God of Jesus, really are down there amid the barbed wire and blood of history, down in the dirty places, in the meanest parts. And the question for us tonight in the presence of these elements of bread and wine, is do we want such a Lord as this? Or should we rather have another who is higher up? If we want such a Lord as this, it means for us something very decisive. It means that we cannot withdraw and hide ourselves in the church anymore. Jesus himself goes outside the religious circle. He chooses Zacchaeus in Jericho, this most

unlikely and irreligious fellow, with whom to lodge. And if we today want to act in Jesus' name, then that is where we shall be too, on the outside of the religious circle among the Zacchaeuses, to create peace and to join hands where present there is only hatred and distrust. Would you forgive me another personal reminiscence? When I was a minister in a suburban church in the city of Glasgow, there was attached to our church a little mission church in the slums of the city. And I had often occasioned to visit in the slum district of Glasgow. And I used to go rather proudly to these doors of these poor outcast people thinking that my being there was very important indeed. I was proud that I was facing up to this challenge of going down to the dirty places of the town. And then suddenly as I would ring a doorbell, my pride would be checked. It came home to me that after all my being there wasn't really very important. For the truth was, that Jesus of Nazareth was there already behind the door. Dwelling with every Zacchaeus, lodging in every mean place. That is the truth about Jesus of Nazareth, forever and ever. That he makes his home with the lowly and the despised, and the rejected. And it is not we, any minister of the gospel who is running the church's mission to the world. It is Jesus of Nazareth the Christ himself who is on ahead of us. He's made his home already in slum districts all over the world. And today in our challenging time, he's simply inviting us to sully forth from our holy places to be with him there, behind these doors, where they despised and rejected like Zacchaeus dwell. And the question for us again, before this holy table is, do we want such a Lord as this who makes his lodging in the meanest place, or should we rather have another? And then in terms of our own personal lives finally, do we really want such a Lord as this who can dwell with us only when we acknowledge our own individual wretched state and our need, and our sinfulness, and our unworthiness, as we fittingly should before these elements of bread and wine. Back in Scotland, the great Dr. Duncan, known familiarly as Rabbi Duncan, because he was a great Hebrew scholar, was once celebrating the Eucharist with his congregation. And in a front pew, he noticed an elderly woman who when the cup was passed along, apparently through some sense of her own unworthiness, was unwilling to take the cup from the hand of the serving elder. And she was brushing him aside. And Rabbi Duncan came down from the holy table himself, to the front pew and he took the cup from the elder, and he placed it in the old body's hand. And in the hearing of all the congregation, he said, "Target woman, it's for sinners. Target woman, it's for sinners." And so indeed it is. The grace of God and the love of Jesus of Nazareth the Christ, are only for sinners. God is standing in his mercy through this table, only to the lowly. To those who recognize and acknowledge their unworthiness. Jesus of Nazareth, the Christ, cannot come and dwell with the proud and the arrogant, and the hotty. It is indeed for sinners, this manifold grace of God which will be dispensed to us tonight, if as sinners, we are open to receive it. The Supreme paradox of the gospel, is that the word that created the whole world is never more powerful, than when in the self abasement and humiliation of Jesus, it finds a resting place in our own self abasement. Well then, do we want this Lord whose primary characteristic is that he humiliates himself, or should we rather have a another? If we really do want this Lord, then in our mission and task in the world, will be intimately connected with his mission and tasks. And in his name, we shall go forth from this sacred place and be found in the lowly and humble place instead. In his name, we shall be found standing in loving solidarity and redemptive concern with all common and needyful, and to our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, would we ascribe all honor and glory, majesty, dominion, a world without end. Amen. (tender worship music)