

In the first reading today, the book of Wisdom reveals to us the powerful and all loving God, the creator of the universe...creator of all life. The writer of Wisdom proclaims, “You spare all things, because they are yours, O LORD and lover of souls....” It is in this understanding of our loving God we also receive the command to respect and love all life...all of God’s creation.

During Respect Life Month we are made even more aware that all souls must matter to us, because all that God has created matters to Him; “For you love all things that are and loathe nothing that you have made.” Understanding how much God loves every human person....all life...reminds us why we must turn away from what has become a “throwaway culture.” Pope Francis explains; “We are speaking of an attitude of the heart, one which approaches all life with serene attentiveness, which is capable of being fully present thinking of what comes next.” The value of a person comes in the now, it is not gained from what they did yesterday, or what they will do tomorrow. Our worth springs from our existence; our value comes from God’s love for each one of his children. As we read in the book of Sirach, “The Lord is a God of Justice, who knows no favorites.”

In today’s Gospel we read the story of Zacchaeus, who Jesus could have considered a “throwaway.” He was a tax collector who extorted money unjustly from the Jews. He not only collected the Roman taxes, but also demanded even more money from them for his own gain. When Jesus saw Zacchaeus dangling from the tree limb he said, “Come down quickly, for today I must stay at your house.” In

these words we hear the soft and generous echo of the theme for Respect Life Month, “Moved by Mercy.” In this encounter with Jesus, Zacchaeus felt the full effect of what it means to be loved and forgiven; so much so that his conversion was complete and “Salvation came to his house.”

What do people see when they encounter us as we attempt to fulfill our vocation as missionary disciples of mercy? Do they see God’s love and spirit of compassion and mercy; or do they see eyes and hearts hardened with judgment?

In his letter to the Thessalonians we read today, “We always pray for you, that our God May make you worthy of this calling and powerfully bring to fulfillment every good purpose and every effort for faith.” When this petition is fulfilled, each of us glorifies God with our actions, reaching out to those who are suffering, body or soul, with His mercy. When we are called to “...proclaim liberty to captives and restore sight to the blind;” we are called to change the hearts of those who have been held captive by their self-serving devaluing of others, and blinded to the value of the dignity of every human person. We are called, through dialogue and encounter to show them the unconditional love of God that can free them from the bondage of sin and transform their hardened and darkened hearts to life giving and life affirming hearts.

Pope Emeritus Benedict wrote: "Openness to life is at the centre of true development. When a society moves towards the denial or

suppression of life, it ends up no longer finding the necessary motivation and energy to strive for man's true good.”

With the gift of life comes the call to live with others. The very idea that "God is Love" teaches us that God himself is all about relationships. One cannot love without an object of that affection; not even God. We are created in his image and likenessand sent with the great commandment to "Love God and Love one another."

Let us protect all life from the first instant of the life of a sweetest baby in the womb, to the last minutes of life of the suffering and sick. We are called to be people of the Beatitudes as we reach out to those who are forced to live in the shadows and margins of society and those who are forced to forage each day for enough food to feed their family and bring peace to their children. We must be a source of hope to those who are lost in despair. To show our respect for life, we must build bridges of mutual respect, love and understanding to unite us in a spirit of solidarity and mercy.

As we gather for this Respect Life Mass, we reaffirm our commitment to be authentic and recognizable signs of God's Mercy when we carry the light of Christ into the world, allowing each person to encounter Christ in us so that, like Zacchaeus, they will be transformed and see what Jesus wants us all to see through His Father's eyes.