This story about Zacchaeus the tax collector comes shortly after Jesus says “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” Someone says to Jesus, “Who, then, can be saved?”

The Gospel writer seems to imply that the Zacchaeus story is a response to that question.

One thing worth noting about the story. There is dispute among scripture scholars about how part of this story gets translated.

When Jesus goes to spend time with Zacchaeus, it says, “everyone” began complaining that Jesus was going to a sinner’s house. Zacchaeus speaks up. In our translation he says: “Lord, half my possessions I shall give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone I shall repay it four times over.”

The original Greek uses the present tense, instead of the future. The present tense may suggest that Zacchaeus is already doing these things. That may imply that Zacchaeus, even though he’s a tax collector, is already acting in some generous, Godly ways. So, maybe the point of the story is not really the conversion of this tax-collecting sinner.

Maybe the point is about the conversion all these people who have terribly misjudged a fellow Jew who happens to be a tax collector. Maybe there is an invitation on the part of Jesus to a conversion on the part of the crowd—an invitation to give up their harsh judgements of one another to see things from God’s perspective of MERCY.
Whether Zacchaeus was speaking of what he was already doing or about a conversion to a new way of life, either way the story is an invitation to a conversion on our part to let go of our harsh judgements both of other people and of ourselves and to imitate the mercy of God so powerfully spoken of in today’s first reading:

“O God, you correct little by little those who trespass, so that they may be freed from wickedness and put their trust in you.”

Earlier this past week I found some inspiring remarks about this Zacchaeus story by Fr. Ron Rolheiser, who I quote often.

He suggests that we all really have two souls, two hearts, and two minds. He says that inside of each of us there’s a soul, heart and mind that’s petty, that’s been hurt, that wants vengeance, that wants to protect itself, that’s frightened of what’s different, that’s prone to gossip, that’s racist, that regularly feels cheated. Seen in a certain light, all of us are as small in stature as Zacchaeus.

But there’s also a tall, big-hearted person inside each of us, someone who wants to warmly embrace the whole world, beyond personal hurt, selfishness, race, creed and politics.

Rolheiser says we are always both, grand and petty. The world, he says, isn’t divided up between big-hearted and small-minded people. Rather our days are divided up between those moments when we are big-hearted, generous, warm, hospitable, unafraid, wanting to embrace everyone and those moments when we are petty, selfish, over-aware of the unfairness of life, frightened and seeking only to protect ourselves and our own safety and interests.

If you think about it, doesn’t that all sound pretty familiar as we approach the election on Nov. 8?
Rolheiser says we are, every single last one of us,
both tall and short at the same time
and either of these can manifest itself from minute to minute.
But, as we all know, we are most truly ourselves when what’s tall in us takes over
and gives back to the world what the short, petty person wrongly takes.

(Today at Mass, David Wilder was accepted into the Order of Catechumens. He is
preparing for baptism, confirmation and First Eucharist here this coming Easter.)

Dave, my fervent hope and prayer is that you will
learn something from us in the months ahead
and that we, too, will be inspired by you
to let the tall, grand part of each of us have more and more
of the upper hand.

I think St. Paul said it eloquently in our second reading:
“We always pray for you,
asking that our God will make you worthy of God’s call
and will fulfill by God’s power every good resolve and work of faith,
so that the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you,
and you in him.”