

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time [C]
October 24, 2010
(Sirach 35: 12-14, 16-18; 2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18, Luke 18: 9-14)

Mercy and Humility Go Together

- A well-known Bishop was having his portrait done by an artist. This Bishop was unusually plain looking. In fact, some might call him homely.
- A fellow bishop remarked half in joke: “I hope the artist does you justice.”
- To which the posing Bishop replied: “I don’t want justice. I want mercy.”
- By the way, I don’t have Bishop Campbell in mind here.
- But, like the bishop whose portrait is being painted, we all want mercy – and God is (fortunately for us) full of mercy.
- However, in order to have hearts prepared to accept the divine mercy, it is necessary that we live compassionate and humble lives.
- Unlike the Pharisee in today’s gospel (from St. Luke), we have the need (planted in our hearts by God) to be humble in admitting our own faults and to be merciful to our neighbor when he/she commits faults and sins.
- Let’s look a little more closely at the setting of Pharisee and the tax-collector in our gospel reading:
- The devout Jew observed three prayer times daily – 9 am, 12 midday and 3 pm. Prayer was held to be especially efficacious if it was offered in the Temple and so at these hours many went up to the Temple courts to pray. Jesus told of two men who went.
 - (i) There was a Pharisee. He did not really go to pray to God. He prayed *with himself*. True prayer is always offered to God and to God alone. A certain American in New England in the 19th Century cynically described a certain preacher’s prayer as “the most eloquent prayer ever offered to a Boston audience.” The Pharisee was really giving himself a testimonial before God.

In his statement in the Temple, the Pharisee boasts of fasting. Now the Jewish law prescribed only one absolutely obligatory fast – that on the Day of Atonement, also called Yom Kippur, which is celebrated in early fall. But those who wished to gain special merit fasted also on Mondays and Thursdays. It is noteworthy that these were the market days when Jerusalem was full of country people. Those who fasted whitened their faces and appeared in disheveled clothes, and thus those days gave their piety the biggest possible audience. Jewish Law prescribed a tithe of all a man’s produce (Numbers 18: 21; Deuteronomy 14:22). But this

Pharisee tithed on everything, even on things for which the law did not stipulate any obligation to tithe. And he boasts of this tithing!

This guy's whole attitude was typical of the worst in Pharisaism. There is a recorded prayer of a certain Rabbi which runs like this, "I thank, Thee, O Lord my God, that thou hast seen fit to include me with those who sit in the Academy, and not with those who sit at the street-corners. For I rise early and they rise early; but I rise early to the words of the law and they rise to vain things. I labor, and they labor; but I labor and receive a reward, and they labor and receive no reward. I run, and they run; but I run to the life of the world to come, and they to the pit of destruction." It is recorded that Rabbi Simeon ben Jocai once said, "If there are only two righteous men in the world, I and my son are these two; if there is only one, I am he. "

So the Pharisee did not really go to pray; he went to inform God how good he was.

- (ii) And then there was a tax-collector. He stood afar off, and would not even lift his eyes to God. The various translations of the Bible do not even do justice to his humility for he actually prayed, "O God, be merciful to me -- the sinner," as if he was not merely a sinner, but the sinner par excellence. "And," Jesus says in effect, "it was that heart-broken, self-despising prayer which won him acceptance before God."

This parable unmistakably tells us certain things about prayer.

- (i) No one who is proud can pray. The gate of heaven is so low that no one can enter it except on their knees and with great humility.
- (ii) No one who despises his fellow human beings can pray. In prayer we do not lift ourselves above our fellow humans. We remember that we are one of a great army of sinning, suffering, sorrowing humanity, all kneeling before the throne of God's mercy.
- (iii) True prayer arises out of looking at ourselves the way God sees us. True prayer does not arise from comparing ourselves to others.
- All that the Pharisee said about himself was true – but he was still not okay with God because he was full of pride.
 - The tax-collector is a LOSER in the eyes of the Pharisee but a winner in the eyes of God (which is all that counts).
 - In our modern world, we are obsessed with winning – especially in sports which sadly are probably the most influential aspect of our American society.
 - But we are also obsessed with winning at all costs in business, in politics, and in the accumulation of wealth.

- Under the influence of the secular culture, we Americans have brought winning and losing even into religion – or at least there is a danger in this.
- So people are “saved” or “damned” - blessed by God or not blessed – we have the temptation to divide folks into the Good People vs. the Trash.
- The Pharisee really saw the Tax-collector as a piece of trash – or worse.
- The Catholic perspective and teaching tries to keep us away from thinking in terms of winners and losers.
- It is only at the end of time that God will separate the wheat from the chaff.
- I once saw the movie “Friday Night Lights” – which is about a high school football team in Texas that makes it to the State tournament in the late 1980s. This film inspired the current t. v. series of the same name.
- It’s a pretty good movie, all in all.
- The coach (played by Billy Bob Thornton) is named Gaines.
- At one point, Coach Gaines tells one of his star players: “The only difference between winning and losing is how the world looks at you.” This insightful quote serves to remind us that how the world looks at us is not important compared to how God looks at us.
- So may the Lord give us the humility of the tax-collector so that our hearts will be open to his mercy and so we can be the only kind of winner that counts – namely the person victorious over sin and death like Jesus our Risen Lord.