

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time 2013

For the past couple of Sundays, our gospel readings have had in one way or another to do with prayer, and so I have tried to reflect on that in terms of our own lives as Christians. Today's gospel once again focuses on prayer- the prayers of the Pharisee and the tax-collector- in order, I would suggest, to get us thinking about what is a really huge and often unrecognized problem, maybe our most basic human problem. But before we get to that, let me ask you to do something. I'm going to give you a sentence, and I want you to fill in the blank, and you need to be as honest as you possibly can, at least with yourself. Here's the sentence: "I thank God that I am not like **blank**". Let me repeat that: "I thank God that I am not like **blank**". Now, just think about that for a minute: Who do I thank God that I am not like? And, after you have filled in that blank in your head, if you have the courage to do it, say it out loud. And if you don't, that's ok, just hold it inside of yourself for a while.

Now, the reason I asked you to do that little exercise was so that we can get past the real difficulty of us hearing the parable of the Pharisee and the tax-collector as if we know the answer from the outset, as if we know that the Pharisee is the venomous villain, and the tax-collector, who is a kind of generous Joe the bartender or Goldie the good-hearted hooker, is the hero, and each, in the end, gets what he deserves, and I, of course, am like the tax-collector, not like the Pharisee. If I walk out of Mass today thinking to myself, "thank God that I am not like the Pharisee", then, I haven't heard the parable. Now let me try to spell this out a bit, because, I think, there is something really quite complex going on in this story.

On the one hand, we can look at the parable and see that the Pharisee is indeed portrayed as somebody that we shouldn't really try to copy. He, of course, does all the right things-he fasts, he prays, he gives alms- things that Jesus otherwise recommends very strongly and things Pope Francis has described as the "three pillars of Christian piety and interior conversion". The Pharisee does things that are good and even necessary. So, what's wrong with him? Well, according to the Pope, what's wrong is his thinking. He is engaged in a search for a "perfect piety", or what the Pope called a "dyed sanctity"- all beautiful, all well made, all about himself and his own salvation, and without any real concern for anybody else. It's as if the Pharisee thinks that he can "get in good" with God, so to speak, without any regard for those whom he sees as "sinners". He uses others- in fact, he uses the whole of humanity and especially this poor sucker who is kneeling behind him- as a kind of foil to make himself look good as he stands before God.

And we in the Church, the Pope says, can fall quite easily into the Pharisee's way of thinking - when, for example, we trust in our works to save us, rather than trusting in Christ. Good works are not the cause of our salvation, he says, but "a consequence, a response, to that *merciful love* that saves us". I'm sure that someone very soon is going to accuse the Pope of being a Lutheran heretic! The Pharisee's hypocrisy can also be seen today in those Catholic ethicists, moral theologians, who say, "you have to do this, and this, and this". They fill people with "precepts", the Pope says, but "*without goodness*". Those who impose "so many precepts on the faithful" are "hypocrites of subtle reasoning (casuistry)" and what they create are phylacteries, tassels that they

lengthen, so many things to make a pretense of being majestic and perfect, but they have no sense of real beauty or joy or largesse. All that they can achieve is the “beauty of a museum”. Wow!

So, on the one hand, the parable can certainly speak into our own world as a clear warning bell. The Pharisee was clearly virtuous, but as the old saying goes, “A surplus of virtue is more dangerous than a surplus of vice”. Why? Because a surplus of virtue is often not subject to the constraints of conscience! When we believe that we are on the side of right and goodness and purity, we can very easily slip into a self-righteousness that warps our interpersonal relationships, impedes a genuine love of neighbor, and deadens our ability to truly examine ourselves, our motives and our actions.

Which leads us back to where we began- “I thank God that I am not like **blank**”. The story that Jesus tells can sting when we begin to realize that there is a little Pharisee in each of us, that self-righteousness and the despising of others is something that I also can do. Oh, we may change the content of what we think “righteousness” looks like- it will look different for liberals and conservatives, for Catholics and Protestants, for Christians and non-Christians, for believers and atheists, but as soon as we make a division of some sort between “us” and “them” and then have contempt for “them”, we have fallen straight into the trap of self-righteousness: I can’t be up, less “they” are down. I can’t be me unless I know that I am not you, you insufficient, deluded fool. I can’t be acceptable unless I know that that one over there is not acceptable. I can’t

know myself as an insider unless there is an outsider against whom I can compare myself.

This way of being human and this way of thinking about human relationships is essentially competitive, is always in rivalry against someone, is always in terms of “us” and “them”, and it was anathema to Jesus. Jesus was constantly and consistently inclusive. He went out of his way to make non-Jews heroes in his stories. He kept company with outcasts. He entered into the pollution of sickness and death in order to find people and to give them wholeness and hope. But in this parable, the Pharisee has brought our all-too human self-righteous, competitive, rivalrous way of thinking and relating with him as he stands before God. The sense of his own righteousness, which he contrasts with that not only of the tax-collector but with that of all humanity, he uses as his point of access to God, the very reason he can stand before God.

But it is precisely this competitive, rivalrous self-righteousness which is the bane, the destroyer, of human relations. And that’s why Jesus takes self-righteousness with such deadly seriousness. It’s the one negative trait that trumps all the Pharisee’s positive traits. The Pharisee has enough religion to be virtuous, but not enough to be humble, and as a result, his religion drove him *away from* the tax collector, rather than *towards* him. This is what Pope Francis calls the “Jonah syndrome”, our tendency to justify ourselves with doctrine and good works while leaving “sinners” to fend for themselves. And unless I can begin to identify that very same tendency in myself, I too will stand before God, either openly or cloaked, with the sentence, “I thank you God that I am not

like **blank**” on my lips or in my heart. Jesus’ parable should unnerve us a little, unless, of course, we are either not listening or we don’t think that it applies to us.

So where so we go with all of this. The tax-collector is the key. He is the key because he will not enter into competition, rivalry with the Pharisee. He will not kneel before God and say, as I certainly might, “Look at that pompous religious jerk. He is so self-satisfied, so pleased with himself, so everything that I hate in religious people.” The tax-collector doesn’t do that. He doesn’t engage in the “over-against-someone” game. He breaks through it by taking the first and crucial step of stepping into the true world of the one true God by throwing himself on the *mercy* of God whose justice and love extends to all, even to the tax-collector’s enemies. The tax-collector is beginning to live the message that we heard from the book of Sirach, ““The LORD is a God of justice, who knows no favorites”, and the tax-collector know that that includes himself.

When we Christians come to know and to accept that what Jesus did was not to create yet another “in-group” that we call “the Church” set up against all “outsiders”, but that in and through Jesus the living God has come to break down the barriers dividing the world between “us” and “them”, law-keepers and law-breakers, good and evil, righteous and unrighteous, the blessed rich and the cursed poor- when we come to know this, then we will begin to understand Pope Francis words: “God's mercy can make even the driest land become a garden, can restore life to dry bones. Let us be renewed by God's mercy, let us be loved by Jesus, let us enable the power of his love to transform our lives too; and let us become agents of this mercy, channels through which God can

water the earth, protect all creation and make justice and peace flourish.” (*Easter Urbi et Orbi message on March 31, 2013*)

Sources

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