

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18:9-14 in its biblical context

In Luke's gospel this parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector follows immediately after the previous week's parable about the persistent widow. The overall context is still an eschatological sermon. Just as the last parable was about prayer, so is the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Luke gives us very clear information about the audience to whom Jesus tells this parable: "Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else." As we read the parable it is most likely that we do not identify with the Pharisee. However, if after reading the parable, we say to ourselves, "Thank God I am not like that Pharisee," we may have to take a closer look.

A Pharisee and a tax collector go up to the temple to pray but the Pharisee's prayer begins as though it were a prayer of gratitude, praising God: "O God, I thank you..." However, the prayer immediately turns into a litany of self-congratulation. This Pharisee brings to his prayer an attitude that makes it impossible for him really to pray. The Pharisee believes to the depths of his being that he is better than other people because he obeys the law. Instead of praying, the Pharisee lists the reasons why he feels superior to the tax collector. All of the qualities and actions the Pharisee claims as his own are good. However, they do not add up to righteousness, that is, to being in right relationship with God. The Pharisee has the idea that he has earned God's favour. Because he does not realise that righteousness is a gift rather than something earned, he does not receive righteousness.

Those in Jesus' audience who are "convinced of their own righteousness and (despise) everyone else" are just like the Pharisee. However, the fact that they are like the Pharisee may prevent them from identifying with the Pharisee as they hear the story. After all, the Pharisee in this story turns out to be the "bad guy." Since the people to whom Jesus is directing the parable think of themselves as the "good guys," they may well miss the point.

Jesus' audience would never have identified with the tax collector. The tax collector would be looked down upon by the self-righteous people to whom Jesus is telling this parable. Tax collectors were hated by the Jews because they were seen as partners in Roman oppression. Since tax collectors received a cut of the taxes, they participated in what the Jews considered both an injustice and an idolatrous act: the coins collected had Caesar's image on them and were thus considered graven images. Nevertheless, the tax collector is the "good guy" in the story. Unlike the Pharisee, the tax collector realises that he is a sinner, confesses that he is a sinner and asks for God's mercy. He knows that he has not earned God's mercy. He asks for it as free gift.

The self-righteous and judgmental people in Jesus' audience are being taught that they, like the Pharisee, do not really pray and are not in right relationship with God, even though they think they are. If, when we read this parable, we say, "Thank God I am not like that Pharisee," then the parable is directed just as much at us as it is at Jesus' original audience.

This parable showcases one of Luke's favourite themes – the reversal of fortunes. This reversal is essential to the parable: it fails if we automatically assume that the Pharisee is a "bad guy". It is important to the parable to see the admirable aspects of the Pharisee's claims. To be sure, he is arrogant, but this is hardly a fatal flaw deserving eternal punishment. In fact, the Pharisee is dedicated to keeping the Law.

This Pharisee devoutly exceeds the Law's requirements. He is the embodiment of fidelity to the Law. As for the tax collector: he is not basically a "good guy" in a tough situation. He is a public sinner. The shock of the parable is lost if we forget that the Pharisee is the very model of a religiously observant person, and the tax collector is a public reprobate. Neither gets what he "deserves" – and that's the point! God's mercy is not "owed" to, or "earned" by, anyone. Its very essence is grace – a gift given by God, in this case, to the one who asks for it, no matter how sinful.

Reflection

This Sunday's gospel contrasts a pious Pharisee and a sinful tax collector. Most of us would immediately identify with the sinful tax collector and his humble prayer. None of us would admit to being like the Pharisee. Yet, some of us are like the Pharisee in that we put our pious acts above everything else and think this is how we are justified. For example, some people fill their house with statues and shrines and say prayers constantly, but are anything but charitable and self giving toward others. Others constantly judge the prayer practice of others (or what they perceive to be inadequate prayer practices), thinking they themselves have the right formula. Truth be told, probably most of us have something of both the Pharisee and tax collector in us. So this is a wonderful opportunity to assess not only our prayer life, but also our basic stance toward God.

Unexpectedly, it is the sinful tax collector and not the pious Pharisee, who goes home justified. Although the Pharisee is faithful to pious practices, he is missing the heart of prayer and the core of faith demonstrated by the tax collector: dependence upon God ("be merciful") and humble acknowledgment of one's true identity ("me a sinner"). Such self-abasement would seem to create a greater distance between the holy God and the sinful tax collector, but the opposite is true. The tax collector's humility draws him closer to God and allowed him to go home justified. For ourselves to go home justified, we need to imitate the practices of the Pharisee in being faithful to prayer and gospel living. But we must always pray and live in the humble spirit of the tax collector. This is how we are justified.

The Pharisee uses his pious practices to separate himself from "the rest of humanity." Authentic religious practices – for the Pharisee and for us today – ultimately lead us to communion with God and one another and being in right relationship. The Pharisee distances himself from the rest of humanity; the tax collector, in his acknowledgment that he is a sinner, identifies with humanity. The Pharisee focuses on himself; the tax collector simply acknowledges how God acts ("be merciful"). The issue here is not whether one ought to perform pious practices; of course we should! The real issue is whether those practices witness to our true selves before God.

Prayer helps us enter into and maintain an intimate relationship with God. Our final exaltation will flow from our humanity, that is, our awareness of being in right relationship with God as creature to Creator. In prayer we not only express this relationship, our prayer actually helps create it. In prayer we acknowledge who we are before our merciful God.

It is difficult to pray like the tax collector! It is difficult to be faithful to prayer! Every day a hundred and one things will tempt us to let it go. Only self emptying and focusing on God will keep us faithful to prayer. Only fidelity to prayer will bring us the true humility which justifies us – an attitude toward God which acknowledges and begs, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner."

Questions for Faith-Sharing Groups

- What is your reaction to today's parable? Does your reaction teach you anything about yourself? If so, what?
- When do your spiritual practices tempt you to self-exaltation like the Pharisee?
- When do your spiritual practices lead you to humility and trust in God?
- How have your spiritual practices united you more deeply to "the rest of humanity"?
- When you hear that God, although just, is quick to respond to the prayers of the oppressed, do you hear this as good news or not? Do you know why?