

Homily for the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

October 23, 2022

St. Bavo Parish

Rev. Peter J. Pacini, C.S.C.

First Reading: Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18 (The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds.)

Responsory: Psalm 34 (The Lord hears the cry of the poor.)

Second Reading: 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 (The Lord stood by me and gave me strength.)

Gospel: Luke 18:9-14 (The Pharisee and the tax collector in the Temple.)

Today's first reading and psalm pick up where last Sunday's gospel left off. Sirach proclaims confidently: "The Lord is a *God of justice*," who hears the cry of the oppressed, the wail of the orphan, and the complaint poured out by the widow. God not only *hears* their pleas for justice, but he will *respond* without delay. Sirach employs one of the most beautiful and hopeful images found anywhere in Scripture as he describes what happens to the prayers offered up by those who are powerless to uphold their own rights against their oppressors. He says, "The prayer of the lowly *pierces the clouds*; it does not rest till it reaches its goal, nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds, judges justly and affirms the right..."

The Psalmist shares Sirach's confidence that God will grant justice to those who are lowly, broken and afflicted. He says, "When the just cry out, the Lord hears them, and from all their distress he rescues them. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves." That's essentially the same message that we heard last week, at the conclusion of the parable of the widow and the dishonest judge. The Lord will be quick to answer those who call out to him day and night, and he will secure the rights of his chosen ones without delay.

These biblical images of widows and orphans clamoring for justice generally make us think of people very different from ourselves. They're weak and vulnerable, not like us, who feel relatively strong and secure. However, Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the tax collector praying in the Temple reminds us that there are other forms of poverty and powerlessness. While it is certainly praiseworthy to feel compassion toward those who are *physically* poor and easily oppressed in an uncaring society, we should not overlook the *spiritual* poverty that afflicts us all, leaving us weak and vulnerable *to sin*.

In the parable, we see that spiritual poverty in *both* characters. The tax collector stands with his eyes downcast and pathetically cries out, "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." He almost gives the impression that he thinks of himself as beyond help. Yet, *he* is the one who returns home justified in the sight of God, for he is willing to acknowledge his sinfulness and ask for mercy. The Pharisee, by contrast, does not recognize his sinfulness, especially his contempt for other people, which is so obvious to us. Therefore, he simply recites a litany of his exemplary conduct and thanks God for making him so perfect that he has no further need of divine assistance. Since he fails to *ask* for God's help, he returns home the same way that he came to the Temple: unrepentant, self-righteous, and blind to his own faults.

It's easy to be disgusted by the Pharisee in the parable. Our first instinct may be to judge him, as if he's a real person, rather than a fictional character. We immediately think,

“What an arrogant, self-righteous jerk!” But, we’re not supposed to *judge* him; we’re supposed to *learn from him*, in order to avoid his mistakes. He shows us the inherent danger in trying to assess our own righteousness, or lack thereof. It’s actually much harder than you might think to get a good read on how you’re doing spiritually. So, when we examine our conscience, we shouldn’t attempt to grade our current level of holiness, much less compare ourselves to other people. There are two main reasons why any such effort is bound to fail. First, we don’t have the necessary *objectivity* to evaluate ourselves accurately. We all have far too many blind spots. Other people can probably judge us better than we can judge ourselves. Second, any honest assessment would surely reveal that we have much room for improvement. We will never achieve perfect holiness while we’re still on this earth. So, rather than trying in vain to determine our *current state of holiness*, we should instead look for areas where *growth* is needed and look for any signs that growth in holiness *has been occurring*. In other words, what really matters is not *where we are* on our spiritual journey, but *what direction we are headed*. That’s where we should focus our discernment.

We also need to disabuse ourselves of the false notion that we can *achieve* righteousness by our good deeds or by our scrupulous observance of God’s commandments. As St. Paul said so eloquently, and so insistently, it is *God alone* who “justifies” us. In other words, he alone has the power to *make* us just, declaring us to be righteous in his sight. Since none of us is perfectly holy, that declaration by God is an act of *mercy*, not an act of judgment. The Lord does not see that we are perfect and declare that to be the case; rather, he sees our *sin* and our *repentance*, and chooses to pardon us. This is what happens when we confess our sins and receive absolution. God declares, through the priest, that he has *removed* our guilt and has *cleansed* us of our sins. He has justified us *in spite of our sins*, just like the tax collector in the parable. The Pharisee, by contrast, goes home *without* being justified, because he does *not* call upon God’s mercy. Believing his own efforts to be sufficient, he simply praises his own righteousness and assumes that God has the same exalted opinion of him that he has of himself.

Obviously, none of us wants to be like the Pharisee in the parable. However, we need to be careful not to model ourselves too closely after the tax collector, either. His honesty and repentance are certainly commendable. But, Jesus has not fleshed out the character enough for us to know how he *responds* to God’s grace and what he thinks of himself *after* being justified by God’s mercy. Does he remain the same pathetic creature that we see in the Temple, too ashamed even to lift his eyes to heaven, or does he feel rescued, renewed and uplifted by God’s love? Repentance is important, but *acceptance* of God’s mercy is equally important. There is no virtue in denying the good that lies within us, or denying God’s ability to heal what is broken within us. The secret to true humility, and to justification in the sight of God, is to acknowledge our need for divine mercy, while also being *grateful* for the divine grace that has been poured out on us.

Our God, who judges justly, will surely humble the one who exalts himself. He will just as surely exalt the one who humbles himself *and* trusts in God’s mercy.