

30th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Year C

Have you ever heard this Gospel reading and thought: “I hope so-and-so was paying attention to this Gospel because they really need to hear it!!” I have to admit that that thought has crossed my mind before. Perhaps we quickly identify someone we know with the judgmental Pharisee. But doing so misses the whole point of this Gospel. In fact, it’s doing exactly what the Gospel warns us about. The Gospel challenges us not to focus on what anyone else might be doing wrong, but rather to take a good, hard look at ourselves.

But it’s so much easier to notice the faults of others, isn’t it? Why is that? Perhaps it is because we aren’t comfortable recognizing our own faults and weaknesses. In seminary we often heard about something called “fraternal correction” – letting one of our seminarian brothers know when he had stepped out of line. It was easier to do than to be on the receiving end of though. When

someone criticizes us or even gently points out something we need to work on, we can quickly become defensive. Yet it's easy to formulate in our own minds exactly what are the faults of someone else and what he or she needs to do to correct them.

It's also easier to make these snap judgments of other people – or sometimes even well-thought out, long considered and ruminated over judgments – because we don't know the thought processes that have gone through their minds that have led them to choose a particular course of action that we object to. Nor do we know the background story, what may have influenced a person to act in a certain way. We're much more aware of our own thought processes, our own background, the things that have influenced us, so we are more likely to give ourselves a pass.

In today's Gospel, Jesus presents to us two characters side by side: the Pharisee and the tax collector. Pharisees and tax collectors make frequent appearances in the Gospels. Jesus is often at odds with the Pharisees while reaching out to tax collectors. In

this parable, both men are praying in the temple. But the Pharisee isn't really doing much more than talking to himself: the Gospel says, "The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer *to himself*." And then he parades all of his credentials before himself. He puts himself above others – in fact, above the "rest of humanity" – all of whom he looks down upon as sinners. He lists all of his pious works, which go above and beyond what even the Jewish Law prescribes.

And then there is the tax collector – who, along with prostitutes, is among the most scorned people in their society. In contrast to the prayer of the Pharisee, the tax collector actually prays to God. And his prayer is heartfelt, anguished. He does not seek to justify himself before the Lord. He doesn't even dare to raise his eyes to heaven. In fact, the Pharisee was right about him: the tax collector is the sinner that the Pharisee identifies him as. And he knows that he is. But unlike the Pharisee, he doesn't point the finger at anyone else.

But in reality, both men are sinners; both men are in need of God's mercy. One has been dishonest and greedy, but the other one is guilty of an even more fundamental and more serious sin: pride. But only one was aware of his sinfulness, and consequently, of his need for God's mercy. And so only one – the tax collector – was justified in the sight of the Lord. In other words, it was the tax collector and not the Pharisee who was able to be forgiven.

One of the things that makes pride so deadly and harmful in our relationship with God is that it blinds us to the reality of who we are and the nature of our relationship with God. It blinds us to the things in us that we need to change. It blinds us to the fact that we too need God's mercy. And it prevents us from opening ourselves up to receive His mercy.

This Gospel is another example of what is known as the divine reversal: the one who exalts himself will be humbled, while the one who humbles himself will be exalted. The one who has the humility to recognize his own sinfulness and need for God's mercy

will be forgiven, while the one who refuses to recognize this cuts himself off from that forgiveness.

To everyone who feels unworthy of God's forgiveness, who fall into the same sins over and over, no matter what they are and no matter how long you have lived with those sins, I want to say: God wants you to receive his forgiveness. There is a chance for healing. God offers you the possibility of peace. Whatever it might be, stop justifying it or rationalizing it in your mind. Stop blocking it out of your mind because you can't deal with it. Recognize that, like the tax collector in today's Gospel, you too are in need of God's mercy. Like the tax collector, cry out to God in your heart for His mercy. God hears you and he will forgive you. He promises this. Come to confession to receive God's forgiveness and let him begin to heal you.

This parable in today's Gospel teaches all of us the importance of prayer. For Luke, "prayer is faith in action. Prayer is not an optional exercise in piety, carried out to demonstrate one's

relationship with God. It **is** the relationship with God. The way we pray reveals the nature of that relationship (Sacra Pagina: Luke)."

So if we don't pray, we don't have a relationship with God. This Gospel teaches us two things then: that we must pray, and that we must recognize our need for God's mercy. No matter who we are, not matter what we have done, we all must be like the tax collector in this Gospel: we must pray – every day – and we must ask God for forgiveness. Remember: there is no sin, however deplorable, that is greater than God's mercy. If we humble ourselves and ask God for forgiveness, He will show us his mercy, and we will one day be exalted in His sight.

- **October 26, 2025 at St. Mary's, Spring Lake**