

**First Impressions 30<sup>th</sup> SUNDAY -C-**

Sirach 35: 12-14, 16-18 Psalm 34 2 Timothy 4: 6-8. 16-18 Luke 18: 9-14

*By: Jude Siciliano, OP*

Dear Preachers:

Pre-note: We have posted a reflection for All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day on our webpage. Perhaps they will be helpful for busy preachers! Go to:

[www.preacherexchange.com](http://www.preacherexchange.com)

Is Jesus ben Sirach contradicting himself in today's first reading? The opening line reads, "The Lord is a God of justice, who knows no favorites, though not unduly partial toward the weak, yet God hears the cry of the oppressed." But the rest of the reading reveals a very partial God who has taken a very definite stand and turned a favoring ear toward "the oppressed...orphan...widow and the lowly." God does seem to have favorites, and they are not the ones our society calls "favored."

Sirach wrote in Hebrew around 180 BCE and fifty years later his work was translated into Greek for a dispersed Jewish community in a Hellenistic culture. He speaks to basic issues, particularly the inequalities in society. For those who see their comfort and riches as a blessing from God for their good deeds and social status, Sirach espouses another perspective. God has not favored the rich, no matter what visible signs they might point to of God's seeming approval.

If anything, God has chosen to take the side of the poor and to pay special attention to the prayer of the lowly—hence this reading's connection to today's gospel. Sirach suggests that if God is to be found standing with the poor and those treated unjustly, then we had better take more than a few steps in that direction ourselves. Justice requires that those who can, should help those who cannot.

Diane Bergant [with Richard Fragomeni, Preaching the New Lectionary. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2000.] points out the original Greek suggests that God not only hears the cry of the oppressed, God does more—God yields to their requests. "It's almost as if God is bound to respond positively to them. As a covenant partner God is accountable to them, especially when other covenant partners disregard their responsibilities" (page 397). The surprise in both this first reading and the gospel is that those considered unacceptable in social and religious

circles are the very ones whose prayer is heard—their prayer is “proper.”

Today’s gospel teaches us a lot about prayer. First, prayer doesn’t have to be long. Both men in the parable prayed very brief prayers. (I had a theology teacher once who said prayer can be very, very short----“Help!”.) But each man’s prayer was very different. In his brief prayer the Pharisee said “I” four times. While he seems to thank God for his goodness, he really is patting himself on the back. In his view he is singular and unique. He thanks God for his not being like “the rest of humanity, greedy, dishonest, adulterous—or even like this tax collector.” In his own eyes he is a completed product. There is little room in him to be changed by his prayer. He might have said prayers, but he didn’t pray because he didn’t see any need to change. There was no space for God to enter his life.

On the other hand, we don’t hear the word “I” from the tax collector. He refers to himself by using “me”—“O God, be merciful to me a sinner.” “I”—“Me” What’s the difference? One (“I”) is the subject of the sentence, the cause of the action. The other (“ME”) is the object, the recipient of another’s action. The tax collector can’t achieve mercy on his own, he reveals his need and desire for God to do something for him. He wants to be changed, and he trusts that God will help him make the necessary change in his life. What must have shocked those who heard this parable is how radical it is. The Pharisee is not a bad person, he is doing everything he should have been doing, he is completely dedicated to living the law’s demands. In fact, he goes beyond what was required in religious law. He is offering a prayer of thanksgiving to God for his personal exemplary behavior.

As someone working for the Roman occupation, the tax collector’s life would have been considered an abomination, a betrayal to Israel and her God. But God sets this sinner right, does what the people thought observance of the law would do--- God justifies the sinner. What got the tax collector right with God had nothing to do with strict observance of the law or a righteous public life. God accepted this sinner because he confessed his sin and hoped in God’s mercy. When it comes right down to it, we are better off trusting in God’s mercy than in our own efforts and what God might “owe” us in return.

Like the two men, we have come into this temple today to pray. Like the tax collector we recognize that we are not complete. We know we need to move over and leave room for God to continue shaping and molding us. What is in our hearts?

Where do we need to make necessary changes in our lives? What are our desires and what are our limitations? We admit today that we are “works in progress,” we admit our need for change and so we take prayerful positions before God. Unlike the Pharisee, we don’t have to compare ourselves to others. We just have to be ourselves and be as honest with God as he was. God sees the empty spaces that need filling and the sins that need mercy. Who knows what work God be doing in us at this Eucharist today? Who knows what changes might come about when we put ourselves in God’s hands today?

We might find ourselves:

- withholding criticism
- giving one another the benefit of the doubt
- letting judgment pass into God’s hands
- forgetting the past mistakes and offenses of others
- willing to be surprised by another’s growth in goodness

In short, we might find ourselves letting go of our fixed notions and positions and giving another person space and time to grow. If God changes us in prayer today, we just might find ourselves enabling others to change. What good does prayer do? Does it change God, or does it change us? The gospel today says the tax collector went home “Justified”—changed. That means he was in right relationship with God. Something had changed in him through his prayer. If we are not changed by our prayers then perhaps we haven’t acknowledged God as the subject of our prayer and ourselves as the recipients of God’s actions—the way the tax collector did. We may have said our prayers, but there is more to prayer than just words.

## QUOTABLE

Wilfred Sheed is someone I have often quoted trying to come to grips with the challenge of good preaching. He does more than dismiss bad sermons (he does that, speaking in withering fashion of “cheery boy scouts”). He reminds one that the pain of life is the most constant, single factor, and says that a preacher not in touch with it recently has really nothing to say. He is right. So, if life right now is full of roses, drop by the hospital soon, or read some reports from the war zones.

— Joseph T. Nolan in, The World, The Church and Preaching: The Best of Good News Commentary. New Berlin, Wisconsin: Liturgical Publications Inc, 1996.

## JUSTICE NOTES

### Catholic Charities: Hearing the Cries of the Oppressed

“God hears the cry of the oppressed.” (Sirach 35:12)

**“As disciples of the Lord it is never enough to say, “We did nothing wrong.” We must be able to say that, with God’s grace, “We did all that we could to stop evil, end injustice and alleviate suffering.”**(Bishop Michael Burbidge, bishop of Raleigh, NC.)

**Catholic Charities** is a diocesan wide organization whose mission is to help parishes and communities live out the social mission of the Church as servant to and advocate for those in need. Catholic Charities hears the cry of the poor and calls us to listen and respond.

“In order to bring about a peace-filled world we work for justice by empowering those in need to help themselves. We respect the dignity of each person as a child of God. All our programs and services are geared to restore and preserve human dignity and include:

**Emergency Assistance:** providing food, clothing for young children and limited financial aid.

**Family Support Services:** family-centered assessment and advocacy; information & referral; parenting, leadership development, ESL and other classes

**Peace and Justice:** a resource office for education and collaboration with parishes and communities to address local and global needs.

**Counseling:** licensed counselors offer skilled interventions, support and healing for numerous life issues

**Parish Social Ministry:** education and partnership to address needs of both English and Spanish-speaking communities

**Adoptions:** education, pre-placement assessments and post-placement supervision for families seeking international and some domestic adoptions

**Immigration:** accredited workers assist in submission of documents with emphasis on reuniting and keeping families together

**Disaster Response:** partnerships with parishes and inter-faith community to provide long-term recovery for survivors of natural disasters”

**What can I do?**

***Donate your time, talent and treasure to one of the ministries of Catholic Charities. Call the regional office in your area.***

(Submitted by Anne and Bill Werdel, from the parish bulletin of Sacred Heart Cathedral, Raleigh, NC)

## **POSTCARDS TO DEATH ROW INMATES**

Here's a note from someone who started writing to one of the inmates listed on this page:

I wanted to share a story with you about what happened when I sent off some post cards to death row inmates a year ago. One of the men dropped me a note thanking me for writing, so I replied, and it was the beginning of a correspondence that has been a gift to both of us. Just this week, he was returned to general death row population after 9+ years on look-down and he attributes some of his positive changes to the support and encouragement that our written conversation has offered. Certainly, there are multiple pieces to the puzzle that is our life, and every person and experience adds something to the finished picture. I feel very privileged to have been able to be a part of this man's journey towards healing. Whether or not there is acknowledgment of the message, it seems pretty obvious that sending postcards is something that needs to be continued. We become who we are in relationship to each other, and it is very difficult to discover the many positive aspects of ourselves in isolation. Continue to encourage people to reach out to these men, reminding them that they do have an inherently good self and reminding them that there is always the opportunity to become more of what God has intended for them. ---Mary Therese Lemanek Allen Park, Mi.

Inmates on death row are the most forgotten people in the prison system. Each week I am posting in this space several inmates' names and locations. I invite you to write a postcard to one or more of them to let them know that: we have not forgotten them; are praying for them and their families; or whatever personal encouragement you might like to give them. If you like, tell them you heard about them through North Carolina's, "People of Faith Against the Death Penalty." *If the inmate responds, you might consider becoming pen pals.*

Please write to:.....

- John Henry #0406487 (11/14/02)
- Terry (Jathiyah) Morre (Al-Bayyinah) #0290634 (6/14/03)
- Jimmy Mc Neill #0507467 (7/15/03)

---Central Prison 1300 Western Blvd. Raleigh, NC 27606