

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” 30th 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:

The Pharisee, in our parable today, is doing a little divine arm twisting. In his prayer he tells God that he has exceeded the usual observances required of a good Jew. He fasts twice a week; though fasting was required only on the Day of Atonement. He pays tithes on his whole income; whereas Jews were obligated to pay tithes only on specific animals and foods. Indeed, if he were doing so much tithing one can presume he was following the custom of giving to both the poor and the temple's upkeep. It is obvious from his self-descriptive prayer he is an exemplary member of his religious community.

The parable should send a chill down the spines of people like us who come to church Sunday after Sunday (or even daily), put generous amounts in the collection basket, pledge funds for church building campaigns and diocesan programs and volunteer around the parish and in the community. We are probably recognized in church on Sunday and can be counted on when a little more needs doing. Measured according to good deeds done and the extras, this Pharisee and we have quite a bit in common. All this is fine, even exemplary, yet Jesus' parable is still meant for us; we need to check our motives and our attitudes towards self and others. Let's look a little more closely at the parable and allow it to shine a light on our lives, especially on our prayer.

First a word in defense of the Pharisee. Pharisees were the keepers of the faith in an environment of Roman oppression, paganism and the poor example set by slack observance by those Jews who no longer practiced their faith or whose faith had become tintured by other religions. Pharisees were zealous and one might even presume some would have appreciated Jesus' zeal for God. The Pharisee in the parable seems to have practiced his religious observances beyond what was expected of a good Jew but had lost a deeper sense of who God is and where God's heart lies. Jesus shows where God's heart lies—it is with the repentant tax collector.

Notice the tragic flaw in the Pharisee's prayer. We learn from Jesus that “the Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself.” Who prays to self? This isn't a prayer directed and open to God. Rather, his prayer is about himself and his achievements. The Pharisee just loves the sound of his own voice praying.

He has a rather comfortable life of piety, but his vision doesn't go beyond himself, indeed, he is looking in the wrong direction. He should be focusing on God.

One of the reasons we pray is to be open to God's voice and stirrings in our heart. Prayer can change us, make us more aware of how God has often forgiven us and, as a result, make us more forgiving and compassionate towards others in their struggles to change their own lives. The Pharisee doesn't acknowledge his own limitations, nor how much God has forgiven him, so he judges the tax collector harshly. He doesn't know the inner disposition of the tax collector, that in fact he is begging God's forgiveness. Looking at his own devout life, the Pharisee thanks God as he "spoke this prayer to himself." While the tax collector, very aware that he needs God's help for what he can't do for himself, begs for forgiveness. His focus is on God and not himself, believing God is merciful. Since prayer can change us, what were the results of the two men's prayers? The Pharisee remained unchanged, while the tax collector "went home justified," he was put in right relationship with God.

Frequently after Jesus has performed a healing, he tells the person he has healed, "your faith had made you whole." Faith is the foundation we stand on; it enables us to rely on Jesus' assurance that God is on our side and wishes to make us whole. Since neither physical healing nor other discernible sign was involved in this parable, observers would have missed the interior change that took place in the tax collector. He was forgiven, a sure but initially indiscernible event.

When the two men left the temple, both would have looked the same as they did when they entered. People would still see a highly respected Pharisee who would return to his fasting, tithing and religious observances. The tax collector would also look the same, but one would presume, if he really believed he had been forgiven, he would follow through and act on the mercy he had received. His life would begin to change. But we are not told this in the parable, all we know is that while exteriorly unchanged and probably still despised as a tax collector, something very profound had been given to the man: he was now in right relationship with God, he was "justified."

A grammatical note. Two men are praying in the temple; their prayers are short. In his brief prayer, the Pharisee says "I" four times; it is an "I- centered prayer". He hasn't made much space for God in his prayer. The Pharisee makes himself the subject of the sentences—first person, nominative case. The tax collector's prayer is even briefer, but when he refers to himself, the first-person pronoun is in the objective case. The nominative case is the subject, the doer—the objective case is the object, the receiver. In the tax collector's prayer, he is open to receive God's

graciousness. The Pharisee's prayer reveals he sees himself as the doer, very much in control of his life and his relationships with God—not much room for God to act here. In private, non-liturgical prayer, we stand by ourselves before God. It is a good and right time for honesty about ourselves and an acknowledgment about God and God's inclination to do good for us. Since we all fall short of God's plan for us, there is a lot to be honest about!

We bring our less-than-perfect selves to this Eucharist. It is not a place for groveling in the dirt. But it is a place for honesty. We come together before a God well-disposed to forgive us our sins and to give us the food that helps us change our lives to conform more to God's ways. While our exterior appearance may seem the same to observers, an interior change has set in motion further changes of behavior that will soon be evident to many. People will say of us: "You are more patient...kinder...more compassionate, than you used to be." That's because God is the subject of our prayers and we the grateful recipients of transforming grace, the kind the tax collector received by being ready to let God be God and the subject of his prayer.

ONE GOOD BOOK FOR THE PREACHER:

PARABLES: THE CHALLENGE OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS, by John Dominic Crossan. New York: Harper and Row, 1973.

This book will help focus on how the parables reveal Jesus' unique view of his world and God's way of acting in it. Crossan shows how the parables expose our idolatries and thus repeat, in a unique way, the constant challenge of all the biblical writers. This book helped me not only see the parables in a new light but also helped me hear the Gospel by using the same perspective the author applies to parables.

QUOTABLE:

"The literal point of the parable [the Pharisee and Tax collector] is a startling story of situational reversal in which the virtuous Pharisee is rejected by God and the sinful publican gains approval. The metaphorical challenge is ...clear: the complete, radical, polar reversal of accepted human judgment, even or especially of religious judgment, whereby the kingdom forces its way into human awareness. What, in other words, if God does not play the game by our rules?"

—John Dominic Crossan, page 69.

JUSTICE NOTES

YOU WILL NEED TO ACT QUICKLY ON THIS, BUT IT IS NOT TOO LATE:

Write a Letter, Save a Life

Charles Roache is scheduled to be executed Friday, Oct. 22, 2004. But it doesn't have to be that way. Charles has decided not to pursue any of his available appeals. Today, he doesn't even have official legal representation.

His case is early in the appeals process. There has been only one direct appeal, and that was required by the state's death penalty system. And there are still significant legal issues to explore during the appeals process.

It's as simple as this: If he changes his mind and appeals, he will not be executed next Friday morning, and the appeals process can begin.

People of Faith Against the Death Penalty asks *you* to write Charles and encourage him to reconsider. Ask him to fight and live.

Tell him you care about what will happen to him and tell him how you feel about the death penalty.

Here's his address:

Mr. Charles Roache #0345539

Central Prison

1300 Western Boulevard

Raleigh, NC 27606

Thank you for your help.