

HOMILY SUNDAY 30 – C*

“The Pharisee and the Tax Collector”

(Sirach 35:15-17, 20-22; Ps 34; 2 Tim 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14)

A priest was approached by a member of the Mafia one day to do a funeral for his brother who was a known crook. He offered a huge sum of money to the priest if he would say only good things about his brother and gloss over his crimes. The priest hesitated, got an idea and then accepted. During his homily, he said simply that this man, compared to his brother, was a saint!

The Lord hears the cry of the poor.

Be humble, and the Lord will hear your cry.

The readings today are focused on that quality that was so close to the heart of Jesus, humility. In the first reading we hear that the prayer of the humble person pierces the clouds. The psalm refrain reminds us over and over that the Lord hears the cry of the poor. And in the gospel it is the sinner, the tax collector, who experiences the mercy and forgiveness of God and is justified, while the Pharisee prays to himself and goes home unchanged.

The word “humility” comes from the word for earth, “humus”. Put simply, it means simply knowing and living in the truth about one’s self. Humility and self-awareness are very closely connected. There is usually some pain involved in being truly humble, but it is a life-giving pain as humility opens the door to healing and growth.

The Twelve Step program of Alcoholics Anonymous calls for a great deal of humility. Step One revolves around the painful truth that one is powerless over something in one’s life, that one’s life is unmanageable. Step Four demands enough humility to face the truth, do a searching and fearless moral inventory of one’s own life. Step Six asks that we go deeper inside to discover, name and get ready to let of our defects of character. And Step Ten asks us to do all this on a daily basis. Truly humility is at the center of the healing power of the Twelve Step program.

I learned a life-changing lesson about humility as a young priest in Beauval from a sparrow! I had gone there to learn Cree, and within weeks the resident pastor had moved to another village, leaving me in charge. Suddenly thrust into the position of being pastor, and naively thinking that I was responsible for the whole life of the Church in that community, I panicked interiorly and over-reacted, working day and night to fix everyone’s problems. We started all kinds of movements and courses to heal, teach and direct everyone. I wanted to be the best pastor this community had ever had. Within a year I had become exhausted from the pace I was keeping and overly serious because of the responsibility I had assumed was mine.

One day, when someone remarked that I had been there a year and nothing had changed, I was devastated. I felt like quitting the priesthood and even called my spiritual director to share that with him. Then two things happened that broke me open.

A sparrow had gotten into the church. I waited until dusk, put the porch light on, opened the door and encouraged it with a broom to fly out. The battle raged for about 10 minutes, with the sparrow flying into everything else but the open door. Finally it landed exhausted on a ceiling rod, and I was able to put my finger behind it, lift it up and take it out of the church, where it suddenly got back its wind and flew away.

It struck me forcibly that perhaps we are like that sparrow, each in our own spiritual cages of doubt, stubbornness, self-will, resentment and fear. Not understanding the depth of God's love, we try to get out of that spiritual cage by our own efforts and just make it worse for ourselves, ending up trying to go through the roof of the cage which is addiction. All we have to do is let go, be humble, admit the truth, hit bottom and we will find a little door there that is always open called humility.

Later that week, someone gave me a little booklet called "This is Exciting". It was about a pastor who found Christianity easy as a young person; then hard as a pastor who was trying to be perfect. That was my situation, I reflected, as I read his story. Then he discovered that Christianity was neither easy nor hard. Curious, I turned the page to read that he had discovered it was impossible.

Suddenly, all kinds of lights went on and I understood that I was trying to do the impossible. I was doing my will in God's name, trying to do it all my way with my own strength. All I had to do was surrender, let go of my own will and self-directed efforts, and let God take over. I felt liberated, like a great load had been taken off my shoulders. In a sense I was born-again, through the virtue of humility.

Corbin Eddy in his commentary offers some interesting insights on today's gospel. He writes that comparing ourselves with others, for better or worse, is not what life is all about. Living out of our own strengths, confessing our own sins, rejoicing with those who rejoice and mourning with those who mourn: this is what life is about. In the end, we all have our own unique strengths and weaknesses that we can take into our relationship with God as self-acceptance. In faith, we understand ourselves to be unique manifestations of the wonder of God, made in the divine image. Having this attitude enables us not to compare ourselves with others but to relate to God with gratitude and to others with respect. In the presence of God, we can recognize our own limitations and just be ourselves, forgiven sinners. Grace is to be aware of this wonderful truth and to go home justified.

The Eucharist we celebrate today is above all a very humble meal that makes present for us the merciful, accepting and compassionate love of God that heals the humble and empowers them to go out, not to fix things, but to simply share with others the Good News that God has already redeemed them and through faith and love, they can now share in that amazing grace.

So remember, the Lord hears the cry of the poor. Acknowledge your need humbly, and experience the merciful and justifying power of God.