

Homily

October 23, 2022

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

18:55 – 32:17

When Garrison Keeler had his Prairie Home Companion on the radio in both iterations, he used to always begin his storytelling with, “It’s been a quiet week in Lake Woebegone.” Well, it’s been a long week at Our Lady of Lourdes this week! You know, you go to put down some carpet and you find out that the church is at only 53°. The adhesive will not work. So, there’s our heating unit right now. (Gesturing toward the window in the chapel) That hole in the window from the outside. It’s not working right now because we don’t need it. But if I could tell you all the things that have changed this week, gone upside down. (Sighs heavily.) I don’t ever want to be employed in construction. So pray for those folks. It’s really a nightmare time right now.

Last week we heard from Luke’s Gospel account about the persistence we are to have in prayer. Deacon Tom did a wonderful explication of that for us. This week though, we are focused on the quality of prayer.

Now prayer is one of the major thematics in Luke’s Gospel account. And so we hear that parable today.

But before we go there, let’s look at that First Reading which points us in the same direction. It comes from the Book of Sirach. It’s a late-second or early first century before Christ *moral handbook* that was translated by a grandson from what his grandfather had written. In the early Church, for whatever reason, took it up as a part of the formation of the moral life of the Christian. Even yet today it filters down to our moral theology. So if you ever read Sirach and you go, “Oh. I’ve heard that before...,” that’s why.

Our reading today comes out of Chapter 35 of Sirach. Chapter 35 is the section on caution to the wealthy and the powerful not to extort from the poor -- the widow or the orphan -- to their own advantage. Our reading addresses the question, “Why does God hear the prayer of these little ones?” Well, they more readily know who they are and who God is. They know full well that they are small and need God. And so their prayer appears louder and more well heard by God.

The Gospel passage today begins, “Jesus addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else.” We see that in the Pharisee, who as it says, addresses his prayer to himself. In the Greek it actually means “to his heart.” In other words, it’s all about him. It’s not really about God.

Luke has a special place in his Evangelical heart for a group called “the *anawim*.” It’s a Hebrew word that means “the least of the least.” It’s one of those thematics that stitches through again, just like prayer does, in Luke’s Gospel account. Our Psalm so well echoed it. “The Lord hears the cry of the poor.”

There is an irony here in the Gospel passage. The tax collector, whom we can laud for his humility, was not one of the *anawim*. He was not a lowly one as depicted in the First Reading. No. He was probably rather wealthy and well-

off. Yet he comes to God humbly in prayer. Not lauding his gains or his own personal gifts or his moral character, but rather praying from his heart – not to his heart – from his heart for mercy.

He had a need. He came to God. And sought mercy. Not to himself. But to God.

You might have noticed in your life that we are not God. Have you figured that out yet? We are not God. No. We are creatures in need of God for all that we have, all that we are and all that we will become. We are small before God. No matter our status in this life, before God we are small. But to God we are not insignificant.

We can take this idea that we are small before God and morph it into seeing ourselves and all humanity as refuse, as a dung heap, as worthless and having no place before God, except that God – well he puts up with us. And I suppose he really wants to take care of us. And maybe even do something for our good. But actually we're just a dung heap.

We can reject this extreme idea about ourselves as humans. And we can move way too far to the other side and be arrogant about our worth and our self-justification as the Pharisee in the Gospel. We can even go so far as to decide “I don’t need God.” And sometimes, my brothers and sisters, when we set aside our prayer time, whether it’s communal or individual, that’s what we’ve said. I don’t need God. I’m self-sufficient.

Or as in Sirach, we can be wealthy and powerful, easily full of ourselves and imagine ourselves to be as a god, who sees the others around us as lowly and as a dung heap, exploitable to our own advantage.

But there is a middle ground. In Christianity there’s always a middle ground. It’s called a Christian Anthropology. Anthropology is the study of “humans.” Who we are. We have a Theology of being human. It flows right out of God’s Word:

We are created.

We are redeemed.

We are sanctified.

We are created, as we know, out of love. – Genesis. We are redeemed of our sinfulness through God’s mercy. That’s shot through all of Scripture, but especially in Jesus Christ. And we are sanctified that we might live these first two gifts well, through God’s help, and grow towards eternal holiness.

What shall we do with these readings? How shall we pray in light of what we have heard? What shall be the quality of our prayer?

Let me suggest a few Psalms and a couple of other more contemporary prayers.

Psalm 18. It says at the conclusion of that Psalm, “With you I can break through any barrier. With my God, I can scale any wall.” That was David, the king, in that wonderful Psalm. But he realized, even as king, what he was able to do was through God’s strength.

Psalm 23. "My Shepherd is the Lord. There is nothing I shall want. Fresh and green are the pastures where he gives me repose. Near restful waters he leads me to revive my drooping spirit. He guides me along the right path. He is true to his name. If I should walk in the valley of darkness, no evil would I fear. For you are there with your crook and your staff that give me comfort." God walks and shepherds us.

Or Psalm 51. "Have mercy on me God in your kindness, In your compassion blot out my offense. Oh wash me more and more from my guilt and cleanse me from my sins." A clear echo of the tax collector in the Gospel when he says, "Have mercy on me, a sinner."

Or Psalm 63. "O God, you are my God. For you I long. For you my soul is thirsting. My body pines for you like a dry weary land without water. So I gaze on you in the sanctuary to see your strength and your glory. For your love is better than life."

And more contemporary prayer. You've seen it on plaques. You've seen it on mirrors that are etched with it, or with calligraphy on them. It's called, "Footsteps." You know what I'm talking about? There's this lament that goes on about how hard things have been. And I call to you, O God. I wasn't sure you were there and then I turned around and looked and there was only one set of footprints, for you carried me.

And finally, the great Serenity Prayer, known to so many, especially in Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous. "God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things that I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Notice, "God grant me..." The source is God, not ourselves.

Brothers and sisters, we are not God. God is. And we need God. God loves us. He doesn't need us, but he loves us. He cares for us. We are his creatures. We are redeemed. We are sanctified.

It's good when we turn to that God every day in prayer, recalling that he hears the cry of the poor.