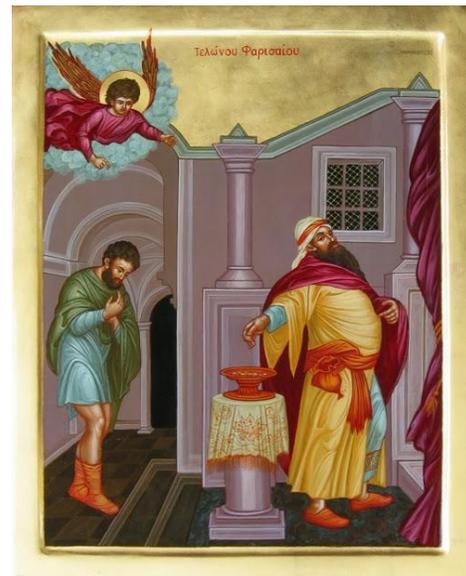


October 23, 2016

30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18:9-14

9 He [Jesus] then addressed this parable to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else. 10 "Two people went up to the temple area to pray; one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself, 'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity--greedy, dishonest, adulterous--or even like this tax collector. 12 I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.' 13 But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.' 14 I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."



Background

The gospel text from last week was largely a parable that told of a persistent widow and an unjust judge. After Jesus told that parable he asked, "But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Luke 18:8b) After putting that question on the hearts of the disciples, Jesus tells the parable that is the text for this Sunday.

The Pharisees took their relationship with Yahweh seriously. It was their practice to go beyond what was normally required by the religious standards of the day, and to live out their relationship with Yahweh in their daily life. At the time of Jesus, the Pharisees were respected. However, after the destruction of the temple, they clashed with the Christian community. It is during this period that the gospels were compiled and this latter attitude toward the Pharisees is reflected throughout.

The tax collectors were generally shunned by the people of Jesus' day because they collected money for Rome, the oppressing government. They were not paid a wage, and therefore they were expected to collect more than what should be required. One way of "getting extra" was using false weights on the scales. If a tax collector desired to repent of his sin, he was required to return all the tax money he had collected plus twenty percent. The longer one was a tax collector, the harder this requirement would become. However, texts like this suggest that tax collectors did respond to the messages of John the Baptist and Jesus. Verse 14 states that this tax collector stood at a distance and beat his breast. In this culture men did not beat their breast. This was a gesture reserved for women. For a man to beat his breast would only be appropriate as an expression of the deepest sorrow.

In the parable, the Pharisee is a model in the way he lived his life. That is also expressed in the way that he prays. His posture is according to the custom of the day. In his daily life he has not entertained greed, dishonesty or adultery. His personal practice exceeds what is required. There is a requirement to fast on the Day of Atonement, but he fasts twice a week. There is a requirement to pay taxes on what one earns, but he pays tax on all that he owns.

The tax collector prays for mercy and makes no effort to correct the Pharisees' description of him. It is presumed that he has been accurately described. The differences between the two are also expressed in their manner at prayer. The tax collector stands at a distance, does not dare look toward heaven, and beats his breast. His awareness of his relationship with God and his fellow Jews leads him to acknowledge his sin and to ask for mercy. The Pharisee's life is the opposite of the tax collector's; so also is his prayer. This means he drew close, looked toward heaven and raised his arms toward God when he prayed. His prayer is that he is grateful that he is not like others.

In the final verse, Jesus uses the opposites that have been the basis of the parable to make his point. God looks upon both the Pharisee and the tax collector from the exact opposite perspective from which each of them had looked upon themselves. The Pharisee looks upon himself and the way he lives his life as making him worthy to stand before God and pray. The tax collector looks at himself and the way he lives his life and sees nothing that makes him worthy to come before God. Both the Pharisee and the tax collector have based their approach to God on their view of their own lives. But the opposite is true for God. Each of their relationships with God is based not in who they are but who God is. This is the God who created both of them and called both of them into a relationship that should be the basis of their prayer. Therefore God's mercy freely flows on the tax collector who asks for mercy. But the Pharisee, who in his prayer took credit for his virtue, reveals how far he is from God. He asked for nothing from God and in the parable he receives nothing.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you know people who strive to take their relationship with God seriously? How is their relationship with God expressed in the way they live their life?
2. Do you also know people who seem to be convinced of their own righteousness? How would you describe your relationship with these people?
3. Why would Jesus address those who are convinced of their own righteousness?
4. In order for a tax collector to repent in his day, he would have had to return all the money he had received as a tax collector plus 20%. Do you think there are places where institutional religion has made it equally difficult for people to return into full communion?
5. When you are experiencing success and achievement in your life does it affect your prayer?
6. How does failure or a sense of your brokenness affect your prayer?
7. When you are part of community prayer, how aware are you of the others?
8. Is your prayer more about who you are or who God is?
9. Have there been occasions when you felt like the only appropriate prayer was to stand at a distance with head bowed and say: "O God, be merciful to me a sinner"?
10. How would you like this text to affect your prayer this week?

The reflection and questions are written by Fr. Paul Gallagher, OFM. They are edited by Sister Anne Marie Lom, OSF and Joe Thiel.

