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Have you run into those churchy types whose very presence makes you aware that you don't measure up? They don't have to publish their religious résumé. Something about their bearing broadcasts it without any need for a printed copy. Some of them, as Jesus mentions in Matthew 23:5, display their distinction by their clothing, widening their phylacteries and lengthening the tassels on their garments. They look like the fans who sport the home colors — except that they're claiming to be on God's team. Their uniform serves as an admission ticket to the best spot in the ecclesiastical environs. This description is obviously a caricature, like the one Jesus drew of the Pharisee who went to the temple precincts flaunting his righteousness on both sleeves of his well-tailored cloak.

Of course, the other actor has to be equally overdrawn, the opposite of character number one, whom we might call Levi. Number two, let's call him George, has pretty good clothes too; his shady profession allows him to purchase the best. But there's something about his walk that's different, ever more hesitant as he nears the place of prayer. When he gets to the temple he's obviously not on his home turf. He doesn't remember exactly what he was taught to do here, but something has drawn him to the place, and it makes him at least a little uncomfortable.

Wouldn't you know that the two arrive at the same time? Levi is immediately aware of that fact and processes right past George, who's standing there, uncharacteristically too timid even to look around him. Surprisingly, Levi is glad to have seen George standing there. Compare and contrast is his favorite word game!

Now we get to the "prayer" of each. Speaking about Levi, Jesus says, "He took up his position," giving the impression that had he been Catholic, it would have been *his* pew ... up front and on Our Lady's side. (Though Mary would never say so, Levi knows she's more important than Joseph.) While some might question whether Levi's words qualify as "prayer," Jesus leaves the question open to interpretation by saying that he "spoke this prayer to himself." He did begin by using God's title. If Levi intended to communicate with God, his message was basically something like, "Congratulations on your good judgment, it's understandable why you appreciate my accomplishments — especially when one sees what a poor job others do." All that was missing in his self-aggrandizement was the use of the royal "we," also known as the "majestic plural."

There's not too much to say about George. He just stood there and prayed with his head bowed, striking his breast in self-incrimination. He didn't make himself anywhere near as interesting as Levi's imagination had! But he did go to God with a clear request. George's prayer gave God room to reply and to do what God does best: to be merciful.

Today's reading from Sirach says that the prayer of the lowly pierces the heavens. That's exactly the point Jesus made with this story. God may not have favorites, but God can do no more with us than we will allow. There's no point in going to God if we only want to talk about ourselves and our plans for the world. God sees through all of that and finds tragic emptiness at the far end.

This is not to say that we are to put ourselves down as worthless. Paul gives us an example of genuine humility in his last testament as recorded in today's selection from 2 Timothy. Paul knows that he's done everything possible to fulfill his mission. He ran a good race and he didn't lose faith in God. That's exactly the combination that makes for living the Christian vocation. His mission came from God, and with the help of God he completed it as best he could. With a clear conscience, he can look forward to receiving the crown of righteousness, a gift for him and the others who long for God.

While Paul knows that he's done his best and believes God will bring him home, he doesn't single himself out. He doesn't have to. Something about his way of being points beyond himself because his prayer has always aimed toward God with hope and thanksgiving. If we seek a one-line summary of what this week's scriptures teach us about prayer, it might well be "Let God be God." And we can take that in many ways.

SIRACH 35:12-14, 16-18

When thanked for something, a friend of mine is known to quip: "It's the least I can do, and that's what I strive for." That idea suggests an interpretation of the first part of today's selection from Sirach. This passage says that God is not *unduly* partial to the weak, and then goes on to point out the least that must be done: to listen to the cries of the oppressed, to respond to the loneliness of the orphan and to receive the sorrow of the widow. That's not undue consideration. It's the minimum that is to be expected. After that reflection, the passage goes on to talk about prayer, making it clear why these verses were chosen to reflect on today's Gospel.

We may have heard the exclamation "From your lips to God's ears!" That phrase isn't just a statement of agreement but an endorsement: "God grant it!" While saying that really doesn't do more than express an opinion or wish, Sirach offers advice about how to ensure that prayer is heard.

First he says that the person who serves God willingly is heard. Just like a mom knows who's talking when one of the kids says, "It's me," the idea here is that people who have been in the habit of praying and who strive to carry out God's will have voices God recognizes immediately. They've been hanging out in heaven's backyard and know exactly how to get their appeals into the "urgent message" box.

Sirach's second example of efficacious prayer says that it is voiced by the lowly. We can imagine an unassuming and perhaps unfairly humbled soul feeling great need and praying with the hesitancy of a respectful peasant in the presence of a king. No matter how stammering the speech might be, Sirach says this prayer, like a swift arrow, pierces through the unknown and finds its mark in God's heart as surely as if it is drawn by a magnet. In this case, it's not so much what the person wants to say to God, but the idea that God longs to hear what the lowly have to say.

When it comes to prayer, Sirach tells us that God has no favorites — but there are special cases. There are some people, says Sirach, who have made God *their*

favorite, and thus when they pray they are on familiar ground in every sense of the term. Secondly, while God has no favorite people, God does have a plan for the world, and those who suffer most when that plan is thwarted are sure to be heard because their lament echoes the cry of God's own heart.

2 TIMOTHY 4:6-8, 16-18

In the Gospel of John we hear Jesus' farewell discourse, a long summary of his mission and legacy. Although much of 2 Timothy is believed to be written by someone other than Paul, this selection appears to be Paul's farewell to a good friend, his reflection on the life he has lived. Paul foresees his death, quite possibly as a martyrdom, and he alludes to that in speaking of his "first defense." Referring to his trial, he admits that everyone he might have counted on deserted him but says he still knew the presence of the Lord standing by him. Paul, who so often referred to the presence of Christ in the community, acknowledges that he found that community wanting, and that in spite of their failure he experienced the grace of God's presence.

In typical Pauline fashion, he is not vengeful because of his abandonment and has even found in it the opportunity to preach to the gentiles. This is not just making the best of a bad situation; it is a concrete example of finding God in all circumstances, making good on his earlier proclamation that nothing can take us from the love of Christ (Romans 8:31-39).

Paul now knows that his end is near, and he is crowning his life with the passion for which he's been known all along. He doesn't complain of weariness or age. He considers his ebbing strength to be a pouring out, as in a ritual offering. Using masculine images, he lets his protégé know that there's no defeat in whatever may come. Just as Jesus looked toward the cross as his glory, Paul sees his departure as the finish line of a well-run race. Previously he was rescued from the lion's mouth. The rescue he now anticipates will not return him to his ministry but will be its fulfillment. That certainty, that peace in the face of impending trial and death, is enough to assure Timothy that Paul has indeed kept the faith and that the faith is all Paul needs.

This reading, coming as we enjoy the autumn season (with Halloween and the feasts of the holy ones who have gone before us), invites us to ask ourselves how we would write a similar letter. What would allow us to say, "I have competed well ... I have

kept the faith”? By sharing this intimate moment with us, Paul, who said so much about how to live as Christians in community, now shows us how to look toward death as fulfillment.

LUKE 18:9-14

Each time we meet the Pharisees in the Gospels, we are tempted to paint them with a broad brush, assuming they are hypocrites, enemies of Jesus and masters of the picky detail. In reality, their way of life and their teaching were probably closer to Jesus’ own than almost any other group of the time. (One would hope that the disciples were a little closer to Jesus’ example, but even they blew it with competition, seeking honor and avoiding the hard things.) The Pharisees were a religious group striving to be holy, something like religious communities or lay ecclesial movements today. In any community like that, the members’ ardent desire to become better can get detoured into exclusivity. Their love of understanding the law can degenerate into legalism and their willingness to be public about their commitment can become ostentation. Unfortunately, once one is on that path, the tendency to go downhill is hard to stop.

The Pharisee in this parable has made great progress in his descent. The worst part of it is that he doesn’t have a clue about how low he’s sunk. In fact, he defines himself against external standards. First, he reminds God that he’s not like the rest of humanity, those people who violate the covenant by wanting more than their share, by evading the truth or by sexual impurity. He sounds a bit like the rich man Jesus will soon meet who fulfilled all the commandments. In essence, he’s explaining to God that there’s nothing wrong with him. Just in case God couldn’t see it clearly enough, he points to the tax collector, and by implication invites a divine appraisal of how different they are. Finally, as if giving evidence in a trial, he offers Exhibits A and B: He fasts and tithes.

The tax collector is so different from the Pharisee that he doesn’t even consider comparing himself to him — or to anyone else. He knows himself and acknowledges who he is. He simply stands before God admitting that he is a sinner. But he does have a request: “Be merciful to me.” This is not the “mercy” of which Mary sings (Luke 1:46-55). This is not the same as God’s compassion or understanding of weakness. When the tax collector asks God to be merciful (Greek *hilaskomai*), he’s using a word that can be translated “atone” or “conciliate.” This is the audacious request that God be the atoner, healing the breach created by sin. The person who

asks for this has nothing to offer but the distance he has created between himself and God. He stands as a powerless, humble beggar who has no right, no claim on what he requests except for God's reputation as a boundless lover.

Jesus says that this man went home "justified." To say he was justified means that he was in right relationship with God. The Pharisee was expounding on his righteousness, relying on his works and what he saw as his worth relative to sinners. His prayer was little more than a progress report: his multi-starred transcript for the degree Bachelor of Science in Self-Agrandizement.

The tax collector had only his humility and trust in God. In the end, that counted for everything. He was in right relationship with God because he wanted and needed God to be God. He couldn't save himself and he knew better than to try. Franciscan Fr. Richard Rohr could well be describing the tax collector's stance when he says, "To finally surrender ourselves to healing we have to have three spaces opened up within us — and all at the same time: our opinionated head, our closed-down heart, and our defensive and defended body" (*Breathing Under Water*, St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2011).

The example of the tax collector is there for all of us, especially the "religious ones" with our self-congratulatory attitudes. Perhaps if we can learn to say the words with the tax collector, we can begin to pick up on his graced mindset as well. Let us pray: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

Planning: 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Lawrence Mick

This Sunday is designated as World Mission Sunday, which might remind us that the church's mission is not a solo operation but one that requires help from others. We offer monetary support for the foreign missions through the collection this Sunday, but our home country and every other country is also mission territory. Mission is integral to the identity of the church, and that mission is a communal responsibility.

Mission Sunday always challenges us to accept our responsibility for sharing the faith with others. The final line of last week's Gospel might prompt some useful reflection: "But when the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" Mission

Sunday also calls us to live up to our name as “catholic” or “universal” in the extent of our concern and love.

The readings today also offer strong reminders of the values that should shape our voting and public advocacy. The first reading reminds us that our God is a God of justice, who hears the cry of the oppressed, the orphan, the widow and the lowly.

Preachers and those who compose intercessions for this weekend might link those categories of people with contemporary issues crying out for justice: elderly people with no one to help them, children without stable homes, the poor and the mentally ill, and a variety of groups oppressed by our distorted economy and social attitudes.

The psalm today continues that theme, with a repeated reminder that “The Lord hears the cry of the poor.” The second reading offers another perspective. Paul speaks of having to face his difficulties alone: “No one appeared on my behalf, but everyone deserted me.” One of the ways that we can assist the poor and the oppressed is simply to stand with them, to be on their side, to accompany them in their difficulties. We may not always be able to resolve their problems but we can be with them as they deal with their troubles. That helps them realize, as Paul did, that the Lord stands by them, too.

The Gospel challenges us in a different direction, pushing us to consider where we need to acknowledge our own sinfulness, which often contributes to the plight of the poor. Often our sins are sins of omission. We think we are living a good life, like the Pharisee in this parable, while we overlook the needs of others around us. Only when we recognize our omissions can we amend our behavior.

Let the preaching and prayers today invite the assembly to recognize the demands of justice that require us to reach out to the needy with concrete signs of God’s love for them.

Prayers: 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time (C)

By: Joan DeMerchant

Introduction

Today’s readings remind us that prayer always begins with an attitude. It does not matter what we’ve done, how much we have, or who we are. What does matter is

what is in our hearts. The constant message has been that God hears the cries of the poor. Whatever our circumstances, humility and a concern for justice matter most. This is either consoling or challenging, depending on the state of our hearts.

Penitential Act

- Lord Jesus, you spoke to those who were self-righteous, like the Pharisee: Lord, have mercy.
- Christ Jesus, you taught that God hears the prayers of the humble: Christ, have mercy.
- Lord Jesus, you call us to pray with hearts full of humility: Lord, have mercy.

Prayer of the Faithful

Presider: With a spirit of deep humility, let us pray now for our own deepest needs and for those of our brothers and sisters across the world.

Minister: For the church: that it may be a model of humility that shows us how to pray ... we pray,

- For those who work for peace throughout the world, especially in the face of conflicting views about how to achieve peace ... we pray,
- For the election of a presidential candidate who will promote policies that reflect a concern for the poor and oppressed ... we pray,
- For the courage to be humble where or when self-promotion and personal success are valued ... we pray,
- For the ability to love and learn from those who strike us as incomplete, damaged or lacking in some way ... we pray,
- For those who are dedicated to praying for or serving the marginalized or the forgotten ... we pray,
- For those who have died ... (*names*) ... and for all who grieve ... we pray.

Presider: God who hears the cries of the poor, give compassion to those who witness suffering. Show us how to be humble, even when we may be blessed with any kind of privilege, for we are all sinners. We pray in the name of your Son, Jesus, the great model of humble prayer. Amen.

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