

FROM THE PASTOR'S



30th Sunday in Ordinary Time – October 28, 2007 C

“THE PRAYER OF THE HUMBLE PERSON PIERCES THE CLOUDS.”

Sirach 35:12

Last Sunday, a nameless widow, Paul and Moses were placed before us as examples of the way Jesus' disciples should pray - persistently, staying the course whether it is convenient or inconvenient, without fear and without flagging. Today, as we disciples gather to pray, four more postures of prayer are placed before us: Sirach (1st reading), the imprisoned Paul (2nd reading), and the Pharisee and Publican (Gospel).

In the first reading, Sirach reminds us of the importance of humility as we stand before God in prayer. Sirach reminds us that the prayer of the humble person pierces the clouds—goes right to the heart of God. Paul knew the power of prayer to strengthen him during the many trials of his life. Then we have the parable of the Pharisee and Publican, which Jesus uses to teach us a very important lesson when it comes to our posture before God in prayer.

Jesus tells the story about two men who went up to the temple to pray (in fact, as we shall see only one prayed). The contrast in lifestyles could not have been more remarkable. On the surface at least, the Pharisee appeared to be your ideal parishioner. He is a morally upright man (he is not greedy, dishonest or adulterous). He prays, fast and tithes. What pastor wouldn't love the guy.

On the other hand, the tax collector was a "bad egg." He was a participant in a very corrupt system which cheated its own people. Politically, he was a traitor and religiously, he was unclean. Plain and simple, the guy's life was "offensive." He had few, if any, redeeming qualities. He was the kind of unsavory character that all respectable people would not want in their company.

So these two very contrasting characters go off to the temple to pray. When they are finished praying Jesus comments:

"I tell you the latter one (i.e., the tax collector) went home justified, not the former: for whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted."

Jesus applauds the prayer of the "bad egg" character and disapproves of the prayer of your 'ideal parishioner' why? Three reasons:

- First, the Pharisee really didn't pray. Instead he went to the temple to *inform God* of how good he was, fasting, tithing, avoiding sin, etc. He was only aware of his good deeds. He was totally blind to his own sinfulness and his need for God and his mercy. *"If a man, after prayer is proud, self-satisfied, he has not prayed to God, but to himself"* (Baal Shem Tov).
- Second, his attempt at prayer was rendered useless because of his attitude toward the tax-collector. Instead of taking time to examine his own conscience, he spent time taking an inventory of the tax-collector's faults. Trying to make himself look good by putting down another was outrageous to God. Jesus despised all kinds of self-righteous attitudes and behaviors. This *externally* religious, holy and dutiful man was very unholy on the inside.
- Third, the Pharisee's prayer was rejected because it expressed the false belief that we can save ourselves by our own good deeds rather than by totally depending on God's mercy.

The tax-collector could have focused on the sins of the Pharisee. He didn't. Instead he focused on his own sin before God and that made his prayer pleasing to God.

Also, the tax-collector was humble before God, whereas the Pharisee was proud. Remember the opening quote from Sirach: *"The prayer of the humble pierces the clouds . . ."* The tax-collector's humble prayer won him God's favor. The tax-collector came before God empty-handed.

Authentic Prayer Changes Us

Reflecting on today's reading, Patricia Sanchez writes:

Soren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), the Danish philosopher and author who described faith as a "leap" whereby the believer goes beyond reason to embrace the paradox of God, also wrote, "Prayer does not change God, but it changes him who prays." In a similar vein of thought, the eminent biblical scholar, Raymond E. Brown, once said in a homily that if no change occurs as a result of prayer, then one has not really prayed. Today's scripture readings, with their shared focus on authentic and genuine prayer invite the gathered assembly to consider the insights of Kierkegaard and Brown inasmuch as these may challenge and change their own personal experiences as praying believers.

The Lucan parable which comprises today's gospel features two men at prayer in the temple. After they had prayed, both departed the temple and ostensibly both probably looked the same to passersby. However, as Jesus observed, one man left his prayer a changed person; he was justified, i.e., set in right relationship with God. The other was not. What accounted for the difference? The Pharisee, it would appear, aimed his "prayer" in the wrong direction. Rather than leap forth in faith from the security of his own self-righteousness, he remained anchored within himself. Rather than gaze in awe and gratitude upon God, he looked at himself, basked in the glory of his accomplishments and liked what he saw.

Then he looked around and was pleased that he found no one of comparable stature. He had not changed; he had made no leap of faith; he had not truly prayed. By contrast, the tax collector looked, not at himself or others, but at God and flung himself upon God's tender mercies which transformed him with forgiveness. His prayer was authentic; because, through it, he allowed God to change him.

Prayer had effected a similar transformation in Paul (second reading); suffering, imprisoned, facing a trial that could have resulted in his death, he did not look at himself as a victim. In prayer, he looked only at Christ, felt his strength at his side and knew himself to be a partner in the suffering that brings salvation. He could have looked at the community of believers and faulted them; they had abandoned him. Leaving no one to take his part. Instead, and through prayer, he looked only at Christ and asked that it not be held against them. Through prayer, Paul had changed; he had learned to look at others with the eyes of God and to serve others with the loving, forgiving, selfless compassion of Christ.

In today's first reading, Jesus ben Sira reminds his readers that those who allow God to change their hearts in prayer will also be pleased to discover that God, who hears all prayers, also has the power to change wailing into laughter, weakness into strength, oppression to freedom and complaint into contentment. All that is needed is a faith that is willing to leap toward God and surrender to the power that saves.

Today, as the members of the congregation depart from their time of prayer together, each of us will look ostensibly the same. The change in us that is effected by authentic, faith-driven prayer will become obvious as the coming week with all of its joys and sorrows, smiles and suffering, loving and living, serving and giving unfolds. Whether or not that change can be sustained will depend upon the renewing power of daily prayer. Until we meet again next week for our communal celebration, each of us can lend to one another the support of mutual prayer, so that the change that occurs

in each of us might become contagious. Learning a lesson from the Pharisee and the tax collector, each of us might also offer to one another the freedom to change. By withholding criticism, by giving one another the benefit of the doubt, by relegating the prerogative of judgment to God alone, by forgetting past mistakes and by being willing to be surprised by another's growth in goodness.. We become enablers of change. Changed by God in prayer, each of us becomes a catalyst for changing and transforming the world.

Reflection Question

1. Are there individuals or groups that you tend to despise? If so, what do you need to do to transform this attitude into a more Christ like one?

Christian Pumpkins

A lady recently being baptized was asked by a co-worker what it was like to be a Christian. She replied, 'It's like being a pumpkin'.

God picks you from the patch, brings you in, and washes all the dirt off you that you may have gotten from the other pumpkins. Then he cuts the top off and scoops out all the yucky stuff. He removes the seeds of doubt, hate, greed, etc., then he carves you a new smiling face and puts his light inside of you to shine for all the world to see.

Have a blessed week,

Le Sarah