



The Inclusive Community

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Luke 18:9-14

Theme: Egotism and Generosity

October 24, 2010

Homily of Rev. Dr. Anthony T. Padovano

This parable is startling. Let us set the scene as it would play out in the first century.

We begin with the Pharisee. If you wanted to give a sense of someone grand in the first century you would present a Pharisee. They were not priests so they did not manage the Temple or perform sacrifices. That would be very grand indeed. But people did not like the priests. Many priests and the high priest or Pope of that day sided with the Roman occupation army

The priests did this because most of their money was in real estate. If you're heavily into real estate, you know that civil disorder destroys property values and property itself. No force on earth could keep order better than the Roman army. So, if you want to protect your investments, go with the Roman army. The high priest was so Roman, so to speak, that he had a direct line to the Emperor. People at large believed the priests favored Rome rather than their own Jewish community.

There are many good priests in the Catholic community today but, as a whole, Catholic priests and bishops look to Rome rather than to the needs of their own communities. So much repeats itself.

But we are considering the Pharisees. The Pharisees were lay people and they were thoroughly Jewish. They were also very bright and very learned. They would be the theologians of our day: degrees, books, and academic standing. They walked around regularly dressed in robes that looked like the doctoral gowns academics wear today at graduation. Theologians today wear them once a year. The Pharisees wore them every day, even shopping. If you took a Pharisee to lunch you would have to deal with flamboyance.

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The Pharisees did many good things for people. Like many theologians today their education made them liberal. The priests insisted on the letter of the law but the Pharisees bent it a bit.

Now if you are walking around all day in fancy attire and if you have an impressive resume and people like what you are trying to do and like your distance from Rome, you might tend to egotism and arrogance. Not all did but a very large percentage did.

Many of these Pharisees held Jesus in contempt. Their conversation at bars and during cocktails went something like this:

Where does he come from?

Nazareth. Where's that?

What rabbi did he study with?

No one.

How does he dress? Who is his tailor?

With such a pathetic resume, why would he dare speak to us of God. What does he know? What university trained him? He grew up in a wood-shop? No, you must be kidding.

We have one other player in this drama: a tax collector. Tax collectors were the kind of people everyone loves to hate. They did not so much side with the Romans. They made money from the Romans but at the people's expense. They were like the bankers who closed clever deals and made a lot of money from people who did not have many assets. The Romans liked the tax collectors the way Wall Street favored bankers and mortgage derivatives. The tax collectors were Jewish so they knew better than the Romans who had money and how they hid it on their income tax returns. So the Romans gave the Jewish tax collectors a substantial percentage of every shekel they collected. The tax collectors could terrify Jewish citizens by threatening to report them to the Roman authorities, the IRS of that day.

If you were a tax collector, you did not dress flamboyantly. You went around the city as inconspicuously as possible because when people saw you, they showed contempt for you.

So, you have the scene.

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Luke says Jesus addressed this parable to all those who “regarded others with contempt”, Luke’s words. Quite an audience. That audience today might include bishops or theologians or Wall Street entrepreneurs. Holding others in contempt is what very successful people can sometimes develop into an art form.

Now, Jesus is daring. He is going to side with the tax collector in this story rather than the Pharisees. If you were in the audience in the first century you would gasp. As the story went on, you would probably say to yourself: No, he’s not going there. Jesus, don’t go there.

He does. He risks his credibility with people to make the point that what you do is far less important than why you are doing it and, more important, what kind of person you are becoming. God is not impressed with our credentials or gorgeous robes or ability to articulate. God is impressed with our hearts.

The Pharisee is about to make a grand speech. The tax collector can hardly verbalize his feelings.

Both of them go to the Temple. Pharisees went to the Temple at 9 in the morning and at 3 in the afternoon, precisely. They prayed at prearranged times so that people could watch them pray and could watch the show as they paraded to the Temple at the stated hour. Pharisees wanted photo-ops when they prayed. The way some bishops or politicians or some Catholics and Protestants at large do today. It does not hurt your business if people see you at church. Benjamin Franklin used to say that. Photo-ops at Church lead to business opportunities and contacts.

You see, it is why you are there that matters so much to Jesus.

The Pharisee, Jesus says, was “standing by himself.” As people watch, he becomes very pious. Bishops, pastors, politicians, some laity, are skilled at putting on pious faces. Once that face goes on, they are heavily into self-righteousness and contempt.

The prayer is incredible.

It begins with words of gratitude to God for all God did to make this Pharisee the magnificent specimen he is. Direct quote, “I thank you God that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers.” I am not like that contemptible tax collector I can see out of the corner of my eye. I fast twice a week. The Pharisees fasted every Monday and Thursday and did not even take water on that day.

The Pharisee continues with his prayer which is more like a press release or a bio sketch than a prayer. This Pharisee would come regularly to the Temple to pray and

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distribute his business card as the crowd gathered. He was convinced that God was lucky to have him. God had a good day whenever the Pharisee came to the Temple. Some Catholics and Protestants are convinced that God has a good day whenever they go to church.

Quite a performance! This Pharisee knows how to play the crowd, how to handle the media. He is skilled in arrogance and theatre. He no doubt wondered at times what God thought of his robes, to say nothing of his pious face.

Jesus tells his audience that this is not prayer. This is self-promotion on steroids.

Then Jesus directs his audience to the tax collector. The tax collector came to the Temple to find God. The tax collector wants no crowd, no cameras. He has no business cards or web site. He just cares about God. He has made a lot of mistakes in life and he recognizes them. His prayer goes something like this:

“God, I mess things up. I do things I wish I had not. I do not understand myself. Others are not happy with me. I need you because I’m so confused and disheartened at times. Help me. Understand me. You love me. I do not know how to love myself. Teach me. You are so awesome. You made me. You made this world. You made my heart. Fill my heart with love. Help me to do the right thing. I’m a tax collector. Maybe I can do that with honesty and compassion, without greed or hard-heartedness. Someone has to work for the IRS. If I do that well, maybe I will not hurt people and can help them. But none of this will work unless I am at your side and you are in my heart.”

Jesus then asks the crowd, do any of you here have any doubt about who really prayed today?

You see, Jesus says in effect, God loves you. God does not want a show. God wants a relationship with you. Does a mother or father want a show from the children they love or a relationship? God is your mother and your father. Give God your heart, not your latest book or your stock portfolio or your uniform.

Jesus is very direct. In his own words he says: “I tell you this man went to his home justified rather than the others.”

God does not want a parade.

Religion, real religion, is what you do when you stop being pious and start being yourself, human, real. Do any of us want a spouse who keeps telling us how impressive he or she is and what a great wife or husband they are, especially in terms of what a

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loser you are? Is that what makes a marriage? Or is it not someone who tells you, you are more than he or she ever thought they would find? You are a gift and I want to be worthy of the miracle or the grace you are.

This is exactly what God wants us to be. Self-promotion makes us use the other for our own advantage. Love makes us humble and generous and as real as we ever get to be.

This parable of Jesus is daring, shocking and consoling all at once. It gives us back the God and the religion we once sought as little children when our hearts were innocent and when we did not think the universe revolved around us. This parable is for the child in all of us who want a mother to love us, a father to care for us and a God who makes us feel worthwhile.