

THIRTIETH SUNDAY – C
October 28, 2007

If you've ever wondered how to really pray—and how *not* to pray—this Gospel gives us some pretty good guidelines.

We are told about two men who went *up* to the temple to pray. Already we see that these two—whoever they are, we don't even know their names—have made a deliberate trip, an uphill trip (meaning a difficult trip), to God's dwelling place in order to put themselves in God's presence and place their prayers before God. Isn't it interesting that, instead of their names, we're given their occupations! This means that what they do is far more important than who they are.

One is a Pharisee, one of many reform movements in the first century. The Pharisees were not clergy, they were lay men, and their main purpose was to find God's presence in all the daily routines of life. So it would not be at all surprising that a Pharisee would go to the Temple to pray. The other main character in this story is the tax collector. Now here is the surprise, finding this guy in the Temple.

Tax collectors in those days were petty bureaucrats who collected Jewish taxes for the ruling Romans who had oppressed them. Consequently they were hated and known to be dishonest, collecting more taxes than necessary because they could keep whatever was left over. They were also considered unclean because they had frequent contact with Gentiles at forbidden times. But for some strange reason, Jesus had a particular fondness for tax collectors. He even chose one to be an Apostle. St. Matthew was a tax collector when Jesus called him to be a follower.

We are led to believe that the Pharisee's prayer is the one God is unhappy with, but at first it's hard to understand why. I mean, he starts off fine, giving thanks, then he says why he is grateful: he is neither selfish, nor dishonest, nor unfaithful to his wife, *not even like this tax collector*, he says, as though that was worse than anything else. But there's more: he says he fasts twice a week (which, I think, is probably more than the rest of us; at least it's more than I fast) and he pays tithes—ten percent—on all he owns, as the OT commands. Well, how many of us do that?

My point is that this Pharisee seems like a pretty decent guy, especially when we compare him to the tax collector, who doesn't seem to have anything in his favor except the one miserable prayer he keeps repeating: "O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." What a pitiful figure he seems to be. So then why does Jesus prefer this tax collector over the Pharisee? What could the Pharisee possibly be doing wrong?

The defect of the Pharisee is not in how he has lived his life, or even in what he says. What's wrong here is his attitude, his prideful disdain for other people. He really believes he's the best. His posture gives him away, without bowing his head, he sets himself apart from others so they can see how good he is. The tax collector's posture is quite different, hiding in the back, eyes not daring to look up. His attitude is itself a prayer as he begs for God's mercy.

Our own prayer life probably is somewhat of a mixture of these two approaches. But I think how we pray, and what we pray for, is a pretty good indication of what kind of relationship we have with God.

One of my all-time favorite movies is “The Hunchback of Notre Dame.” There are several versions of this classic tale, including an animated one. But the best one, I think, is the 1939 version with Charles Laughton as the hideously deformed and deaf bell ringer, Quasimodo, who falls pathetically in love with the beautiful gypsy girl Esmeralda. She is not in love with him, of course; she has other things on her mind. Not only does she have a handsome young boyfriend, but she’s desperately fighting for the rights of her people, the gypsies, who are being persecuted by the French.

There’s one profound scene in the Notre Dame Cathedral in which the camera shows a series of young women, all beautifully dressed and self-absorbed, praying with great intensity. One begs, “O God, make me pretty,” another insists, “O God, make me rich,” and still another asks, “O God, give me a wonderful husband.” Then we see the gypsy girl Esmeralda, not even a Christian, who prays very simply, “O God, take all I have, but please be good to my people.” Now *that’s* a prayer.

Perhaps that’s what Sirach means in the first reading today when he says, “He who serves God willingly is heard; his petition reaches the heavens. The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal.”

You see, one of the most common mistakes we make when we pray is that we expect an answer. Not only that, but we expect the answer we *want*. The truth is, prayer provides not an answer, but an experience of God’s love. It is prayer—true prayer—that takes us deeper and deeper into the great mystery of God’s endless love for us. And it is prayer that enables us to express that love back to God. If we expect anything more than this, we have missed the point of prayer completely and we are destined to be terribly disappointed.

As we pray here at Mass today, and as we pray throughout this coming week and always, the challenge for us is to take a good look at our own prayer life through the eyes of both of these characters in this Gospel story: the Pharisee and the tax collector. What would each of them say about how we pray? What do we ask for when we pray, and better yet, what do we give? Do we expect something in return for our faithful prayers, or are we content to simply experience God’s love each time we pray?

How we answer these questions and how we lift up our hearts in prayer truly does tell us a great deal about our spiritual life. It also tells us what kind of relationship with God we really have.