

Parable of the Pharisee and Tax Collector

Laura Kazlas



“The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal, nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds, judges justly and affirms the right.” These words from the book of Sirach in the first reading for mass today, fit perfectly with the gospel reading. Today’s gospel is the parable of the pharisee and tax collector. The self involved Pharisee who prayed thanking God that he wasn’t like the rest of humanity, and the tax collector who stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven, but prayed for God’s mercy because he was a sinner. Jesus said, “I tell you, the latter went home justified, not the former.” These verses in scripture continue the theme we had in yesterday’s readings for mass, because again, Christ is warning us not to be self involved and concerned about our own holiness, or focus our attention on the lack of holiness in other people. The readings today are pretty simple and we all pretty much understand these verses, especially Jesus’ parable about the difference in the prayers of the tax collector and the sinner.

In many of Christ’s parables the meaning of the story is not quite as clear though. It’s possible that he told the parables in a manner that different lessons could be

learned, by different people and cultures, throughout the many future generations of Christians that would also hear them.

The parables are timeless, yet ever fresh. Nothing sticks in your mind longer than a good story and Jesus knew this was a good way to reach people in a way that the average person could relate to. Even today the basic elements of life that Jesus speaks of is still present in our world over 2,000 years later. But, the parables do make you think about its meaning and how it could apply in your own life.

The parable in today's gospel very clearly illustrates how easy it is to get caught up in our own little world, content with our own progress in holiness, and look down upon the people around us who are obviously not perfect people. This is a very easy trap to fall into, especially because the Catholic faith strongly encourages spiritual perfection. The "Catholic guilt" that so many fallen away Catholics speak of, is a result of never measuring up to the spiritual perfection that was expected of them.

This is really something we should give more than a little thought to. People leave the Catholic church because they are less than perfect people and feel like they can never be as perfect as all of us. This is for the most part nonsense, because none of us are perfect, but young people do not always understand this, from the outside looking in. Even persons in a state of mortal sin should be encouraged to attend mass (without receiving communion) and without our judging them, so that they can come to a better understanding of their sin and turn from it. A perfect example of this are Catholics who are pro-choice, whether they are recent converts or cradle Catholics. Their thinking is flawed, but hopefully someday they will hear an explanation about the dignity of human life in a way that they can understand better, and change their mind. Young people are like this too, about many of the more difficult aspects of our Catholic beliefs.

Selfishness is something we are all born with. Spiritual formation is a process that takes some time to transform us more into the image of Jesus Christ, the most unselfish person the world has ever known. We are at all different levels of spiritual progress. We may even excel in one area, but drastically fall short in another. That's what happened to the Pharisee in today's gospel. It takes a lifetime to grow into the person that God meant us to be and sometimes it is one step forward and two steps back. When we look at other people's virtues or faults we should try to realize that we are all at different stages of spiritual development. A person who seems to have a lot of faults and sins, are usually working toward

overcoming them. If they aren't, then we should pray for them, because we haven't lived a perfect life either.

It's kind of funny how Saint Paul writes to Timothy in the second reading today, that everyone deserted him, but "may it not be held against them." He didn't even find fault with those who abandoned him! Another awesome thing he said was, "But the Lord stood by me and gave me strength." Jesus was on his side, just like he was with the tax collector in the gospel reading today too. Things are not always what they seem to be and Jesus knows the truth about our lives. Saint Paul mentions that Jesus is a just judge and we will *all* be awarded a crown of righteousness when we reach our Father's heavenly kingdom. Our crowns may have different sizes and colors of jewels in them, but one thing is for sure, we will all be very grateful just to be there. That's what matters in the end, that we all make it to heaven and celebrate with one another in our Father's Kingdom.