

October 27, 2019 A Lesson Learned Homily: The late Thomas Merton, one of the most profound religious thinkers of the last century, was a man of many gifts. A poet and monk of the Cistercian order, Merton earned world- wide acclaim for the many books he authored in his brief lifetime. His notoriety afforded him many opportunities to correspond with some of the world's most notable figures. Merton learned that success can make one susceptible to pride and even to adopt a condescending opinion of others. An important turning point in his life occurred in a most unlikely place. Only two or three years prior to his death he shared his story in one of his books. He wrote:

“In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream of separateness, of self-isolation in a special world, the world of renunciation and holiness.”

“The whole illusion of a separate existence is a dream”

The lesson he learned is that the monk, far from being superior to the run-of-the mill citizen, is one with them in their joys and sorrows, and their triumphs and failures. He does not stand on a pedestal looking down on others.

In the well known parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector (Lk.18:9-14), Our Lord makes some rather pointed comments on humility and pride. It is interesting to note that the word Pharisee means, “separate one”. As a lay scholar and interpreter of the Mosaic Law, the Pharisee in the parable stands, not with others in the Temple, but by himself to pray. His choice is not to be in the company of sinners. His prayer is condescending of others. “I give thee thanks that I am not like the rest of men, greedy, unjust, adulterous, and also this tax collector.” (Lk.18:11) In his commentary, the Protestant scripture scholar William Barclay notes, “The Pharisee does not really go to pray, he went to inform God how good he was”.

A story - in my first year as a seminarian studying for the priesthood, I got to know quite well the school's librarian, a Presbyterian Christian. One of our nation's most renowned bishops often visited the library, and borrowed several of the books in the vast collection. I admired him for his learning and for his outstanding gifts as a preacher. Once, I asked the librarian to share her thoughts about the bishop. To my surprise, she said, “Never liked him, too conceited”. I was stunned. Perhaps I was just too naive!

In the Books of Psalms, the Psalmist writes, “I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites. I hate the company of evildoers and will not sit with the wicked”. Yet that was precisely the company Jesus kept during his ministry. Indeed, in next week's gospel we will hear that Jesus visited the home of a notorious tax collector, Zacchaeus. Jesus offended the sensibilities of the self-righteous because of his association with the outcast.

Are we condescending of others?

Do we intentionally avoid those among us whom we hold in contempt?

How often do we judge harshly our neighbor?

Again, a story. Two elderly Irish ladies are standing outside a house of prostitution. They each spot a man they recognize leaving the house in a hurry: the local Protestant minister. "Well, what do expect," cried one of the ladies. "After all, he is a Protestant minister." Sometime later, another man they recognize leaves the house - the local Catholic priest. "Such a wonderful priest", exclaimed the ladies. "I am certain he brought comfort to the troubled girls". How partial are we in our judgment of others?

Let me conclude my homily by quoting Dr. Barclay once more. He writes, "No man who despises his fellow man can pray. In prayer we do not lift ourselves above our fellow men. We remember that we are one of a great army of sinning, sorrowing humanity, all kneeling before the throne of God's mercy".

Such was the much needed lesson Thomas Merton learned.

Amen!