

**Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time – Year C
(Oct. 24, 2004)**

Being Honest

Did it occur to you while you were listening to that parable that Jesus was talking about us? Think about it. He tells a story about two people who go to church. Well, we go to church, don't we? Here we are. The parables of Jesus are always challenges, not just to the people of his own time but to us as well.

Do you recall how on several recent Sundays we have heard Jesus giving us lessons about prayer? Today we have another one. It's about sincerity and it challenges us to examine our motivation. Why do we come to church? And how do we pray once we get here?

I don't know if you have had this experience, but I've heard a number of young people – and some not so young – say, "I don't go to church anymore because there is so much hypocrisy. People go to church on Sunday and for the rest of the week they act as though they have never heard of God or Jesus or love your neighbor as yourself." Or the other complaint I have heard is about supposedly pious people who go to church, not just on Sunday, but every day, who zealously say their rosary – both very good things – but then look down on others who don't do the same thing. Somewhat like the Pharisee in Jesus' story. Now sometimes the people who complain that way are just looking for excuses to justify their own lack of religious conviction. Sometimes they just don't understand what it means to come to church and participate in the Eucharistic celebration. And sometimes, unfortunately, they might just be right.

Let's take a closer look at these two men who went up to the temple to pray. First of all the Pharisee. It's really a shame that the Pharisees receive such bad press in the Gospels. They were not really as wicked as they seem to be. Indeed they were the religious leaders of the time and generally were good people. They were the ones who preserved the traditions of the Jewish people and kept them together after the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Romans. They had a particular respect for the law and for orthodoxy. Apparently in Jesus' time there were some who went

too far, who multiplied rules and regulations without good reason and imposed unnecessary burdens on the people. These are the ones that Jesus denounces, calling them hypocrites. And these are the ones Jesus is addressing when he tells this story.

Listen to the prayer of the Pharisee: “I give you thanks, O God that I am not like the rest of men – grasping, crooked, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week. I pay tithes on all I possess.” Well, fasting and paying tithes were good things, like going to Mass every day and saying the rosary. The trouble is he is proud of what he does, proud in a bad way, and he looks down on the tax collector who is standing behind him. Indeed since he was praying up in the front of the temple we might wonder how he knew the tax collector was behind him. Did he look around to make sure there were people present to witness his piety? There is certainly nothing humble about his prayer. Indeed he comes off as being pretty self-righteous. And that’s why Jesus says he is not pleasing in God’s eyes.

And what about the other man, the tax collector? We are all familiar with the situation of tax collectors in Jesus’ time, how they were despised as cheats and thieves and collaborators with the Roman occupation forces. The Pharisee considers this man beneath him and he would not be caught dead in his company. But it is just such as these that Jesus seeks out. He is accused of keeping company with tax-collectors and sinners. Jesus tells us that this man kept his distance, not even daring to raise his eyes to heaven. All he did was beat his breast and say, “Oh God, be merciful to me a sinner.” He is not proud. He is not self-righteous. He recognizes the truth about himself. He admits his sinfulness and begs God for mercy. It sounds much like the prayer of the lepers two weeks ago, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us.” This is the man that Jesus praises, “For everyone who humbles himself,” he says, “shall be exalted, and he who exalts himself shall be humbled.” It’s a constant theme in Luke’s Gospel, beginning with Mary’s Magnificat. Remember? “He has put down the mighty from their thrones and has raised up the lowly.”

Well, I said at the beginning that the parable is about us. Now let’s be perfectly honest. I think we all have to admit that there is at least a touch of the Pharisee in us all. There are times when fear might force us to say or do

things that we might otherwise not say or do; times when we make judgments based on insufficient evidence; times when our pride refuses to let us forgive and be reconciled; times when we, too, think we are not like the rest of humankind.

I recently read a prayer that was written in the context of today's Gospel. Let me read it to you and suggest that we make it our prayer today and raise our thanksgiving to a high Christian level:

“Oh God, I thank you that I *am* like the rest of humankind. I thank you that, like everyone else, I, too, have been shaped in your image, with a mind to know and a heart to love. I thank you that, like everyone else, I, too, am embraced by the crucified arms of your son. I, too, have him for a brother. I thank you that you judge me, like everyone else, not by my brains or beauty, my skin tone or muscle power, my clothes or my color, the size of my house or the make of my car, but by the love that is your gift to me, by the way that I share in the passion of your Christ. I thank you that for all our thousand differences, I am so remarkably like the people all around me.

“Thank you, Lord, for making me so splendidly the same as everyone else, because it means that I am that much closer to your son, who became what all of us are: wonderfully and fearfully human. Keep me that way, Lord and . . . always, be merciful to me, a sinner.” (Walter J. Burghardt, S.J., *Still Proclaiming Your Wonders*, p. 143.)