Opinion
Spirituality



"The Pharisee and the Publican (The Parables of Our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ)," 1864, detail of a wood engraving by Sir John Everett Millais (Metropolitan Museum of Art)



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Sometimes when we hear a parable like the one of today that we've heard many times before, we almost stop listening. I know that story; I know how it ends. But it's important that we not presume that we've plumbed the depths of the parable. We need to think a little bit and try to reflect together on the very powerful message that Jesus is providing for us.

First of all, shouldn't we question ourselves about what's wrong with thanking God because God has allowed me to live a good life, to be faithful to the promises of my baptism, my commitment to follow Jesus? Isn't it OK to sometimes thank God because of the goodness within ourselves? Of course it is.

## Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

*October 27, 2019*

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18

Psalm 34

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

We should be thinking about all the ways, sometimes with struggle, sometimes perhaps more easily, that we follow this message of Jesus in the Gospel that he teaches to us Sunday after Sunday. But the important thing is and what the Pharisee (who obviously was a very faithful person, living up to the Jewish law and even going beyond its basic requirements) did was he forgot the one thing that is most important. Why is it that we have good things and we have been able to live a good life? Why are we able to come together in a liturgy like this and celebrate joyfully as we gather together as God's people to worship God?

What we have to remember is God first loved us. The Pharisee was kind of counting up all that he did: "I earned God's favor." No, that's not how it happened. It's not how it happened for any one of us.

In the Letter of St. John where he talks about God as love, he says, "God is love. Where there is love, there is God, but God first loved us." That's the important thing — God first loved me. I wouldn't even exist if God didn't love me, love me into existence, be with me every second of my life; I would be nothing. God loved me, loved me into existence. God is with me every instant of my life, every good thing I've been able to do. God is supporting me, calling me, embracing me, guiding me, helping me.

If we remember that and really live with that awareness, certainly we will thank God every day. Every moment that we live, we owe thanks to God. Even a smidgen of virtue that might be within us, we owe thanks to God.

So yes, thank God because you are here. Thank God because you are living a good life. But remember: God first loved you and that's why you're able to live the good life and love God in response.

That's the very first thing — we have to make ourselves different from that Pharisee who thanked God for the good things he did, but forgot it was only because God loved him first. The other thing I think that is important as we listen to this Gospel is to notice that right away the Pharisee makes comparisons.

He sees this poor publican, the person who collected taxes for the Roman government. They were despised, they were violators of God's law, and he looked down on him.

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Isn't it true that sometimes we will look down on people who we think, in one way or another, are not quite as good as we are, especially the poor in our midst?

You come up to an intersection and there's a person with a cup hoping that somebody will drop a few coins or perhaps a dollar into the cup. What do you think when you see that person? You might think, "He probably made some bad decisions."

That's a fair judgment. But you don't really know why people end up on the street. None of us knows what has gone into the life of another person. We have no right to feel superior.

I'm not saying we always do, but I confess I know I feel that way. Why am I not out there on the street? We have to make sure that our attitude toward those who are like that publican, almost afraid to be in God's church, that we respect them, that we even look up to them and have empathy for their struggles.

I'll tell you something that happened in a parish church in this diocese not too long ago. A friend of mine told me about what happened. Her brother is a street person. Her mother is a daily communicant, so his mother is a daily communicant. He wanders the streets even in their neighborhood. You can imagine it breaks that mother's heart to see her son seeming to be abandoned, but surely, I know this mother would want him to get the help he needs, but with his mental illness, which it is, he doesn't do it.

It happened for a few days in a row in a period of cold weather when she was at weekday Mass, a small community of people there; he sat in the back pew. That went on for two or three days.

The other people in the church complained, "That's embarrassing that he's sitting there and it smells." They said, "Father, can't you do something to get him out?"

The next thing you know, there was a sign on the door: Patrick Smith is not allowed in this church. The mother comes to church and sees the sign. He's turned away. It broke her heart.

Why would any church do that? Why would we not try to make our church welcoming to street people? They're the poorest of the poor that God (we just sang) hears the cry of the poor. God reaches out to the poor.

God loves the poor without making any judgment because we really don't know why another person ends up on the street. We need to respect those people, love them the best we can, try to bring changes in our society so that they can get the help they need that's probably mental illness of some sort.

Most of all, we must refrain from judging. We must not think of ourselves as superior. We must try to love every person and welcome them as God loves the

poor, the vulnerable, or as the first lesson puts it: the widow, the orphan and the poor.

There's a lot for us to think about as we listen to this parable and to pray that we can be change if we need some transformation in our own mind and heart and spirit, so that we can, as we sang, hear the cry of the poor and respond as God does through Jesus with love.

***Editor's note:*** *This homily was given Oct. 26 at a confirmation Mass celebration at St. Ambrose Church, Grosse Pointe Park, Michigan. The transcripts of Bishop Thomas Gumbleton's homilies are posted weekly to NCRonline.org. Sign up here to receive an email alert when the latest homily is posted.*