

30<sup>th</sup> Sun. Ord. Time (C )

St. Athanasius and St. Francis Parishes

October 22, 23, 2016

Reading the gospel of St. Luke during this Third Cycle of our Lectionary gives us many wonderful stories about very interesting people. We have two of them again today ...the Pharisee and the publican. Like the widow of last weekend, today's Pharisee and publican are praying ... each in their own manner, of course. Just as last weekend's widow represented the powerless and the judge the powerful, this weekend's Pharisee represents the truly religious and devoted Jew whereas the publican represents those who have .compromised their Jewish faith to get ahead in life. The publican collected tax for the Roman occupiers of their land. Matthew, who wrote one of the other gospel accounts was also a publican, tax-collector. In fact, Jesus discovered Matthew collecting taxes at his table in the Temple area. Responding to the call of Jesus, Matthew left his table, however, and followed Jesus. There are many such stories as Matthew's call throughout the Scriptures: there is hope for everyone. Thus it is the publican, the tax collector, who is held up as the model, just as last weekend's widow was held up as a model. Today's tax collector models humility as last weekend's widow modeled persistent prayer for us. Discipleship demands prayer, and persistent prayer at that.

Discipleship demands that we be wise ...not only with things of the world, but wise in the things of the Holy Spirit as well. Discipleship demands openness to change. That is what conversion is all about.

A couple of months ago, near the end of August, we heard the gospel about entering the Kingdom through the narrow door. At that time I mentioned the difference between 'education in the faith' and 'formation in the faith'. I drew upon my own seminary experience, during which the focus was clearly on education to the expense of formation. Education gives information and leads to a casual association with Jesus. Formation leads to conversion and change. Formation leads to genuine commitment to Jesus and to his mission. And at that time I also mentioned how, as desirable as conversion may be, conversion can lead to self-righteousness in a person. It can look similar to what we see in the Pharisee of today's gospel: "*O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity – greedy, dishonest, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.*" If you remember, I also mentioned that I do not find that kind of attitude here.

Dealing particularly with today's First Scripture from Sirach and today's gospel text, there **IS**, however, something additional for us to consider. When our lives go smoothly, and for most of us here we would need to admit that our lives do go on rather smoothly, it is easy for us to make the assumption that the lives of others go as smoothly, or could go as smoothly if they would only live more like ourselves. Success can blind us to the situations of others. For example, the rich man did not notice the poor man at his gate, the judge tried really hard to ignore the widow in last weekend's gospel, the 9 cured of leprosy who seemed ungrateful, the elder brother in the story of the Prodigal Son seemed to have little empathy for his younger brother, and other stories that we have heard recently from Luke.

I remember clearly an example with my own mother. Her neighborhood didn't have a near-by grocery store. One day when I took her to the supermarket, I went off to look for something for myself as she did her shopping. When I located her in an aisle a bit later, I noticed her with a can of something in her hand, but that she then returned the item to the shelf and moved on. Later I asked her about that and she said the item was too expensive and that she really did not need it. I saw a whole new side of her that day. A widow lady watching closely how she spent money.

The less privileged among us know their limits. They bump into their limitations on a daily basis. Sometimes they even have these limitations held up to them. Truly "it is harder for a rich man to enter the Kingdom than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle."

As Vicar I would frequently ask retired priests if they were making it financially. As a retired priest they no longer received free room and board and several other 'perks' they received when in active ministry.

As successful people, as those for whom life goes smoothly on a regular basis, we need to work harder to be open to those for whom life is not so smooth. We must watch that we do not get lulled into a complacency, wrapped up in our own privilege, even failing to recognize how privileged we are.

As disciples we are called to give preferential option to the poor, but first we need to recognize them and their need. In addition to the Lord's Prayer, a good daily prayer for any disciple of Jesus is the one we hear the tax collector pray in today's gospel, "*Lord have mercy on me a sinner.*" And for me personally, I probably just need to remember my own widowed mother putting back a canned item that she undoubtedly would have enjoyed.

Shortly we will pray over our gifts of bread and wine, "Lord, we pray that what we do in your service may be directed above all to your glory." May it be so.