

The Twenty-Second Sunday of Pentecost

October 24, 2010

Sirach 35:12-17

Psalm 84:1-6

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

In the name of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I actually know that Pharisee. He isn't here in this church, I hasten to explain. Why do I say he is a Pharisee? He never missed church, always sat in the front row, and supported every cause or project that came along. All of which sounds truly commendable, doesn't it? I thought so too, but then one day I complimented him on his generosity and he replied, "I am buying my way into heaven." I thought he was kidding, but he wasn't.

So in this morning's Gospel, we have his ancestor, probably in the front of the Temple, loudly proclaiming his own profound piety, commending himself for the good works he does, all of which is for the benefit of those around him, but particularly for the benefit of God, because the Pharisee knows that God is keeping track of such things. The man is consumed by pride and is convinced that he will be rewarded. He is doing what the writer of Sirach, our first reading, calls a "bribe" in hope of gain.

In contrast, there's the tax collector; nobody likes tax collectors. Does God like tax collectors? The man is not so sure. All he can do is confess his faults and sins and throw himself on God's mercy. He cries for the undeserved, unearned compassion of God.

What do you suppose that Pharisee will do when he doesn't get what he wants? What happens when he perceives that God is not rewarding him in the manner to which he feels entitled? What happens when God doesn't accept the bribe? The man will be gone in a second, feeling rejected and unappreciated by God. His faith is conditional and ultimately self-serving and disappears like a puff of smoke.

Consider Paul and his letter to Timothy. You realize, of course, that for various reasons, Paul was about as popular as a tax collector. Ironically, Paul was a Pharisee himself and probably as loud as the one in the Gospel. Paul at first was mistrusted, for good cause, by the Christians since he had been really enthusiastic about persecuting them. Then, of course, when he became the great missionary for Christianity, he was rejected and abused by the Jews, not to mention the Romans. Then, too, he could be truly abrasive and long-winded in his sermons even with his followers. Paul could be difficult.

When Paul writes, "I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith," he knows whereof he speaks. What has brought him through it all? He knows that it has been the grace of God, and he knows, as does that tax collector, that he has done nothing to deserve it or earn it. His conversion was humbling, not exalting. It was so humbling that Paul never speaks of it; Luke tells us that Paul was thrown down and blinded. Perhaps something like that has brought the tax collector to the temple in humble contrition. Paul regains his sight, physical and spiritual, and sees that God is present in Jesus Christ, God's gift to His Creation.

In this letter to Timothy, reflecting on what that has meant in his life, Paul tells us that he knows that God stands by those who stand by Him and that God rewards those who are truly, sincerely faithful. God knows sincerity when He sees it.

You see the unearned, undeserved gift of God to the tax collector and to Paul is ours, yours and mine. He has given the gift to us in the presence of Jesus Christ, and in that gift, we have a promise of salvation and eternal life. Life itself is a gift. We are called to return the gift, to give our lives to God as He has given to us, and do it as generously as we can.

In His Holy Name.