



Thirtieth Sunday Ordinary Time

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-19 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 Luke 18:9-14

We have been reflecting on the parables on prayer and today brings us to the great classic, the two men in the temple.

Luke said that Jesus told this story to those who considered themselves as righteous which indicates that his audience were Pharisees.

The name Pharisee, the separated one, usually meant one who became dedicated to the observance of the Law. Like all groups there were some people who got caught up in legalism or became strict observers of the letter of the Law and forgot the spirit of the Law. Jesus had many friends among the Pharisees but occasionally issued warnings to those who forgot the purpose of the Law.

In the thirty-fifth chapter of the Book of Sirach, a book of wisdom, we are given a reflection on the Law which relates the keeping of the Law to Justice. To keep the Law in its fullness is to act justly. The prayer that is pleasing to God is the prayer of the humble, that is, one who knows how to be in right relationship to God. If you read the whole of Chapter 35 you will see why it is given as a prelude to Luke's story.

Two people go to the temple for prayer; a Pharisee and a tax-agent. The storyteller sets us up because everyone knows that Pharisees are good people and tax-agents are spiritually poor. They belong to the class of people that good people avoid because they don't practice their faith with any diligence. We become eavesdroppers on their prayers.

The Pharisee gives thanks to God, not for the wondrous works of God, but for himself. The focus of his prayer is not God but himself. He lists the sins of others to highlight his own goodness. "Thank God I'm not like them..." He is aware of the tax-agent in the background so his feeling of religious superiority is strengthened. Having listed the sins of which others are guilty the Pharisee now mentions his own virtues.

The tax-agent has only one prayer which he says over and over, "Have mercy on me I am a sinner."

Contrary to what we imagined we are told that the tax-agent's was the better prayer. The expected first, is last.

The question for the listeners is, "How can a good person be judged to be less than a bad person?"

Jesus is pointing out the pitfalls of losing sight of the goal of prayer. What is the purpose of prayer?

Prayer is an outward sign of our relationship with God. Our focus is God and in God, all of humanity.

The first action of prayer is *to listen*.

We are told that God speaks in a variety of ways. Four key ways are given to us. God speaks in and through creation. God speaks through our human story past and present. God speaks through prophets. God speaks through Jesus.

The second action of prayer is to respond. Out of our active listening to God we move forward to act on behalf of God.

The letter to Timothy sums up the Christian life. We are to be eucharist for others; bread broken and wine poured for the life of all.

Patricia Stevenson rsj