

[Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18; Psalm 34; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14]

When we first encounter the Pharisee and the tax collector in the parable, we are at once given enough information about them to jump to all the usual conclusions. A Pharisee is by definition a person with a rigorous commitment to God, the law, ritual, and the moral code. A tax collector is a traitor to his country and his religion, making a buck off his fellow citizens by collaborating with a foreign oppressor. Which person would you expect will gain a hearing from God?

The smart money is on the Pharisee, but the smart money is about to go south. Like all too many penitents in the confessional, this fellow is fully prepared to admit the wrongdoings of others and to announce his own personal goodness. In case it has escaped the attention of the Almighty, the Pharisee points out that he is a better breed of person, not like the greedy, dishonest, adulterous folks around him. And then his gaze falls on his fellow intercessor, a public figure everyone loves to hate. The Pharisee assures God that *he* fasts and pays tithes on his whole income -- not like this thief, who profits from the Roman occupation and adds a little for himself on top.

Is this self-adulation and other-directed accusation meant to be prayer? As conversations go, this one seems to be a monologue with its speaker as its object. The only room left for God might be at the conclusion, where it is surely expected God will offer hearty congratulations. But we might wonder if this is the goal of true and sincere prayer -- to gain the divine seal of approval.

These days, the term *tax collector* doesn't carry the same universal disgust as for the audience of Jesus' day. But substitute another profile -- drug dealer, molester, serial killer -- and now imagine the scene paired with a modern figure whose integrity is presumed, if you can name one these days. Suddenly we begin to hear the scandal in this story and how quick we were to judge these characters. We don't expect the drug dealer to have regrets or to accept his guilt. But here we are, faced with his remorse and breast-beating humility before God. It occurs to us that we don't know the first thing about another person's heart, or what potential for transformation lies within. This is the first lesson we learn from today's Gospel: we don't know the first thing about another person's heart, or what potential for transformation lies within.

Once again we have Saul of Tarsus (who will be called Paul of Tarsus) as a handy case in point: himself a Pharisee, zealous for orthodoxy and an inflexible adherence to religious law as it had been handed down.

A living, breathing, organic version of God's will never occurred to him. So he was fully prepared to put to death the "blasphemers" who followed the way of Jesus.

In the same way, the Christian community had Saul pegged as an irredeemably dangerous fellow, to be avoided at all costs. No one saw him as a big fish that Jesus intended to catch -- which is why the first generation of believers never seemed to know what to do with Saul once Jesus and the Gospel had netted him.

As a church song from decades ago reminded Catholics, and as we sang in our Responsorial Psalm, "the Lord hears the cry of the poor." Our Church has taken the stance of "a preferential option for the poor" to reassert the balance of justice by every means necessary. But that doesn't mean God likes poor people better or that they are necessarily morally superior. The tax collector in the story most likely had a fatter wallet than the Pharisee, which could have added to the pious man's disdain. And the tax collector admitted he was a sinner -- no contest in the case of who was more moral.

What made the tax collector justified was neither poverty nor morality, but his willingness to acknowledge his lowliness before God. The Lord hears *that* cry every time. That is the second lesson of today's Gospel: our humility before our God.

A few years ago, my spiritual director ruined one of my favorite pastimes -- judging others and putting them down. I didn't want to acknowledge that's what I was doing. I preferred to call it small talk or dishing the dirt. Some would call it venting, or sharing news. But then my spiritual director cut into my fun, and he did it with just seven words: "If you spot it, you got it."

His point was that when I see some trait in another person that irritates me, odds are that I have that same quality in myself. Not liking it in me, I attack it in others. The faulty hope underlying this strategy is that I can persuade myself I'm better than others. All it does, however, is separate me from others -- and from God.

Reflection questions for this week: God knows no favorites, Sirach tells us. He judges justly and affirms the right. Is that true for you? Does everybody get equal treatment from you? If not, why not?

Do you feel heard by God? Does God hear YOUR cries?

How confident are you of your own salvation? Where do you find yourself stumbling the most in the race to keep the faith? Have you ever found yourself making the Pharisee's mistake of comparing yourself with others to spotlight your own virtue? When have you felt most humbled? Do others see humility in you?

In my last parish, when we hosted the homeless, volunteers were asked to lead prayer each night, and one night Marvin, one of our homeless guests offered to lead grace. I am ashamed to say my expectations were low, unkindly and judgmentally so.

Marvin took his place in the center of the room and with an eloquence born of faith, proceeded with the blessing. There was not a dry eye among us at the end of the prayer as Marvin asked God to give “everyone their greatest hopes and dreams,” this in a room where peoples’ hopes were for a bed for the night, a warm meal, and maybe a day job for tomorrow. When we left the kitchen that night, Marvin slipped each of us a prayer he had written just for us: “Lord God, give them each a gift. Bless them with a great week to come. Let each day be an adventure to them. Let each day count.”

You see, the problem with the Pharisee isn’t that he’s serious. It’s not that he’s rigorous, attentive to the Law. The problem is that he has forgotten that the vocation of Israel is to welcome all humanity to adore the living God. All nations will be called to the holy mountain, to worship the living God. Not because any nation has earned it!

Salvation is always pure gift, not the result of human ingenuity. But that problem is not an exclusive dilemma of the historical Pharisee. The problem is with those who draw boundaries, imagining that they have earned salvation. My group, the in-group, is the only ones who are worthy.

So, we must ask ourselves, “Who is the Pharisee today?”

We must recognize that it is all those who try to limit salvation to their in-group, whoever that in-group might be.

After all, it’s the entire human family called to salvation and to adore at the Eucharistic altar, discovering the God who loves unto the end.

Who is the Pharisee?

The danger of Christian life is that it may not be any of “them” out there.

It could be us! AMEN!