

[Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18; Ps. 34; 2 Tim.4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14]

A Pharisee and a tax collector go into the Temple to pray... Sounds like the set up for a joke, right? A priest, a rabbi and a minister walk into a pub and the bartender says, "What is this, a joke?" [Delayed pity laughter.]

I'm reminded of a performance put on by two Mennonite actors at my last parish. Following the performance, at about 9:30 PM on a Saturday night, I had to provide them with dinner at a local restaurant. Then, by about 11 PM, it was on to a recently-built motel for their lodgings, which I had arranged by phone. It was a new, clean motel, maybe six months old, and I had never been inside of it.

When we approached the motel entrance, I turned to the two men and said, "A priest and two Mennonites enter a motel..." They asked if they could put that on their blog the next morning.

When we got to the registration desk, the young, perky blonde woman, about in her early twenties, shouted, "Fr. Nick! It's so good to see you again!"

Now, it was kind of her to greet me with such enthusiasm, but the tone of her greeting was such that I thought her next line would be, "Your usual room?" Judging by the look on the faces of the two Mennonite men, they were thinking the same thing!

I asked the woman, "How do we know each other?" She said, "You were the priest when I was confirmed in the Ninth Grade!" We hadn't seen each other since then. I was off the hook, and the Mennonites went to their room!

Back to the Pharisee and the tax collector walking into the Temple. The formula would be perfect if the Pharisee and the tax collector had both gone into a bar. But of course, a Pharisee would never drink or dine in the same place as a tax collector. Just about the only place these two might meet is on the grounds of the Temple. In fact, they don't meet, in any sense of the word. The Pharisee marches up front and begins his sublime self-congratulation performed for God's benefit -- otherwise known as *his* prayer. To himself!

The tax collector stands at a distance, not eligible to enter beyond the outermost court because of his line of work, and offers his confession -- otherwise known as *his* prayer. From far off, the tax collector's mumbled words are received gladly in Heaven, while the proud announcement of the Pharisee leaves him unjustified in the eyes of God. What happened?

You can't have a conversation with someone who does all the talking. While the Pharisee behaves as if he were standing in front of a mirror, engaging in self-promotion, the tax collector in the far corner of the Temple mount is actually the one in dialogue with God. We know this because he knows enough to know he's a sinner, and not only because of his profession, but because he's a human being. It is the best and only way to come to prayer: in the spirit of humility. We are dust, *humus*, humans who come from the soil. If we know who God is -- all-powerful, all-generous, all-loving, and all-merciful -- then we must know who we are: in desperate need of all of the above!

Forty years ago, I selected today's Second Reading as the Second Reading for my own funeral liturgy, whenever that will take

place: “I have competed well; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.” Between now and when I die, I now have to live up to those words! I also have recommended this reading at funerals I have celebrated here at St. Martin’s as a testimonial to the many witnesses of faith we have in this community. How many of them fought the good fight and have finished the race while keeping the faith?

So, St. Paul in his captivity as a prisoner in Rome, speaks these tender words to his protégé, the young St. Timothy that the ending of his ministry, much like the beginning of his ministry, rests on the mercy and the grace of God. The difference between St. Paul’s bragging and the Pharisee’s bragging is great. St. Paul realizes that any greatness and achievements in his ministry is because of God’s grace and God’s will welling up in him and in his ministry; the Pharisee was relying only on his own wits and counting his own accomplishments.

Today’s Gospel parable tells us that God knows us as we really are. The parable tells us that God accepts us as we are. Yet God is not angry with us. For even though God ACCEPTS us as we are, He never LEAVES us as we are. We are always encouraged and challenged to move beyond what we are and where we are.

Beyond where we have been, to something even better. This requires of us a healthy self-awareness, a healthy humility, and yes, a healthy pride about ourselves.

Reflection Questions for this week:

Think of those who are less active spiritually or religiously than you. Those people of whom you say, “Thank God I am not like

them!” Do we grieve for them because of their sins and their possible spiritual blindness? Do we do anything to help them grow closer to Christ?

And, perhaps most importantly, do they experience Jesus every time they encounter US?

One man condemns himself by his pride and another is rescued because of his humility. Let’s hold close to the prayer that saves. It is one of the oldest prayers in our Catholic tradition:

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” AMEN!