

## **Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time: October 23, 2016**

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### **“The Pharisee and the Publican”**

“So, what kind of work do you do?” he asked. The other person responded, “Well, I have a leadership job in the Catholic Church ... actually, I’m a bishop. And you?” “Um, I found a job cleaning rooms at the Internal Revenue Service. Lucky for a Muslim refugee to find such work!” An awkward silence between very diverse persons followed, for a fairly long time, until the IRS worker asked, “So, why are you in the hospital? I’m here for a heart bypass surgery.” And the Bishop turned immediately, and responded, “I’m here for the same operation!” And with that awareness of their commonality, an engaging and lively conversation ensued.

The white board in a hospital room includes the names of the assisting medical professionals and some details about a person’s care, but nothing about their profession, religion, income, societal importance or anything else that would indicate the clear differences between their life stories. For however unique and different people may be, physical illness levels the playing field, and any two persons share a common chapter in the story of their lives, which might be entitled: “Simply human and in need of healing.”

Beneath our uniforms and labeled clothing are human bodies which never lie, and which, when they are hurting, make sure that we listen to their truth! That is not necessarily the case when we assess our spiritual health, as is evident in the gospel passage. We can fool ourselves. The Pharisee measured himself by the standards of following rules and performing certain practices, with a focus on his own performance, not on God. He expressed a false ‘gratitude’ for his self-righteous behavior and compared himself with others whom he judged as less or worse than himself. Such an attitude is sadly evident today in the biases, prejudices and xenophobia that divide us.

Yes, his words sounded like a prayer, but what we say in prayer is less important than the condition of our hearts, from which we pray. Spiritually, he was in need of more than a bypass, like the roommates waiting for surgery. Rather, he was a candidate for a *transplant*, which would exchange a hardened, self-satisfied, ego-driven heart for a soft new heart, open to depend on and trust in a mercifully loving God, the giver of all good

things. By failing to recognize his symptoms, he failed to get to the “heart” of the matter and to the core of his deepest identity: God’s beloved creature, in need of healing.

On the other hand, the tax collector reminds me of Pope Francis, as he responded to the reporter’s question, “Who is Jorge Bergoglio?” His immediate response was “I am a sinner.” While that part of his response was widely reported, it is important to finish his thought, “but I trust in the infinite mercy and patience of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The Pope, a good Jesuit, knows that each of us can be identified as a “loved sinner,” which is so different than self-identifying as a guilt-ridden sinner full of shame. The paradoxical truth is that one who admits his or her sin, imperfection, limitation and weakness, has taken a very important step in the process of spiritual growth. Similarly, the experience of illness or injury can become an opportunity to know ourselves and our God like never before.

The central saying of Jesus in today’s familiar gospel language is, “The one who humbles oneself shall be exalted and the one who exalts oneself will be humbled.” The words ‘humble’ and ‘exalt’ can be so loaded with inaccurate and unhelpful meaning, that I would suggest instead, “Anyone who lifts oneself up will be brought down, and anyone brought down will be lifted up.” Expressed in this way, the saying may be understood less as a threat to be feared, and more a realistic expression of life and faith in God. We are not asked to live a false humility, often misunderstood as seeing ourselves as “less” than anyone else. We do not have to (and cannot) make ourselves humble, for the truth is that life itself will humble us, and bring us to our knees, whether through illness, loss, a feeling of emptiness, real or spiritual poverty, misfortune, realization of our imperfection, and, of course, an awareness of our sinfulness. It is so difficult to let go of who we thought we were and how we imagined life ought to be.

And yet, as initially strange as it may seem, those apparently “negative” and painful experiences are all wonderful starting points for authentic prayer, and for transformation! It is not that we have to look for ways to fall or fail, but when (as one poet writes) “life turns us upside down and all our precious coins fall out of our pockets,” it is in the stillness, neediness and depth beneath our egos, and beneath the stories we tell about ourselves, that we have an opportunity to surrender in faith, and allow the mercy and love of God to heal us and to create a new heart within us. Two helpful books which I have read are: “Learning to Fall: The Blessings of an Imperfect Life,” by Philip Simmons, who completed the chapters at various stages in his process of dying from ALS/Lou Gehrig’s Disease, and “Falling Upward: A Spirituality for the Two Halves of Life,” by Richard Rohr. Each of them, in unique ways, suggest the spiritual advantages of being humbled by life, especially by illness and by failure! Such authors remind me that you and I are never alone in our most challenging experiences, even when we feel that we are.

St. Paul wrote from prison, where he essentially was given a death sentence, a terminal prognosis. And yet, he experienced the spiritual growth that happens in times of struggle and waiting for God to come and show us the way. And so he proclaimed that as long as he lived, God would stand by him and be his strength. And, in another letter, he announced the result of his journey, which included pain, suffering and a sense of being alone. He would no longer identify himself simply as a Pharisee, or a sinner. His identity, like ours, went beyond being a patient or a bishop or a laborer. Rather, he experienced a complete heart transplant, to the point where he could say, I am “no longer I, but Christ in me!” And this identity lives on, even beyond death!

Until we have arrived at that point where St. Paul did, it certainly seems best not to overly focus on either our virtues nor on our sinfulness, because the purpose of self-knowledge is not to puff ourselves up nor to put ourselves down. Rather, as stated by St. Catherine of Siena, our self-knowledge helps us “to know better the goodness of God.” The self-satisfaction of the Pharisee left no room for that experience, and any self-pity in the tax collector could also become a barrier to knowing “God’s goodness.” The truth is that God loves both characters in the gospel (and all of us “characters”), and Jesus always showed a preference in seeing and responding to the little ones who are most in need, fragile, poor and hurting. It is when each of us feels so small and most in need, that we may best realize how God looks on us with love, and offers us grace and mercy. May we express our needs to a loving, forgiving, inclusive and compassionate God, and God will rescue us, heal us in the inmost part of ourselves, and give us new hearts and a new spirit. And from the place where life has humbled us, our merciful God will lift us up!