

Reflections on Sunday's Readings: October 27, 2019

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time [C]

Sirach 35: 12-14, 16-18

2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18

Luke 18: 9-14



Offering Nudges of Hope

Introduction

The first reading from Sirach would be a lovely passage to pray with today or during this coming week. The lines here remind us that God has no favorites, or to put this into the positive: **we are all God's favorites**. But just as in a family setting, when one member of the family is hurting or sick, we pay more attention to this person. So it is with our Good and Loving God. God is especially mindful of those who are wronged or hurting or alone in their struggles.

We might also think of this as God being especially mindful of those places in us where we struggle the most, or hurt the most, or feel our frailty the most.

Sitting then and praying with this insightful reading, we are invited to be like this description of God in how we look at others and reach out to those around us. We are called to do so with compassionate eyes and hearts.

Psalm 34

This theme is picked up in the psalm today. The words of this psalm stir hope in us knowing that our God is one who knows us, hears our prayers, and responds with mercy. Again we are challenged: 'Do our prayers and actions bring hope to others around us?' Are we letting God's compassion and mercy flow through us?

Gospel Parable

These themes come together powerfully in the Gospel story today. Jesus in this part of Luke's Gospel has been teaching us about prayer; and in this parable today, he speaks to us about 'what attitude are we bringing to prayer.' What attitude is most helpful in our prayer times?

Once again Jesus tells a story that contrasts two persons, but they might also be thought of as two parts of ourselves. The **Pharisee** is a religious leader; and as Jesus describes him, he actually goes beyond the ordinary practices of piety and devotion with his fasting and his tithing. But his motivation is unclear. Does he come from a "should" outlook to do these religious practices? Or is he thinking of "earning" his place before God or before others with his devotion? Does he want to "look good" before others, or does he genuinely want to please God? We're not sure.

What he is saying about himself is probably true, but he knows it and likes others to know it too! His piety and good works have led to arrogance and to judgement of others. His piety **separates** himself from others and actually from God's fuller influence. The Pharisee has fallen into self-sufficiency or self-righteousness that is keeping him from the "**flow**" of love or from a living relationship with God and with others.

The **tax-collector** on the other hand realizes that he is a sinner. He has been using his position with the leaders of the Roman occupation to collect taxes on his fellow Jews and to add to the taxes for his own livelihood. This man is aware of his actions and is sorrowful for them; and he comes asking for mercy from God, for forgiveness, trusting God will understand and help him.

The Context of the Parable

One commentator here opened up this passage for me further with an insight into the context of the times of Jesus. Jesus and his fellow Jews are living with the Roman occupation of their lands. The Romans often tried to subvert the cultures of the peoples they had conquered to further impose their culture and ways on them.

One way of survival and resistance for the Jews was to emphasize the Hebrew diet and customs, the Sabbath worship, and their tithing. This helped them keep their religious and national identity. The Pharisees were doing this out of devotion surely but also as a way for the Jewish people and religion to survive. They would have strong feelings against those who collaborated with the Romans, and those who collaborated with the Romans were ostracized for their collaboration.

But this writer explains that often those who collected taxes for the Romans or even joined their military ranks in some way were often just trying to survive and feed their families. Some surely did not want to collaborate, but this was often the only way to survive and to not go into indenture or enslavement. The Romans were the only game in town. For a good number of these collaborators they were uneasy about their service to Rome. They felt the inconsistency with their faith and their people.

This is why Luke highlights that many tax collectors and other collaborators with Rome came to hear John the Baptist and to listen to Jesus to see if there was some room for them in God's kingdom. Jesus sees their predicament and offers them hope. He tries to "nudge" them to come closer and change their lives. Jesus believes that sometimes just a **nudge**, or a **sign of welcome**, is needed to bring someone back into the spiritual and religious community, and he is willing to offer this to them.

This is what the Pharisee is too blind to see because he is caught up in his self-righteousness and his judgements rather than true holiness.

Conclusion

A couple of weeks ago we heard Jesus tell the parable of the "prodigal son" as it is often called. We saw that it might be better called the parable of "the lost sons" because both were lost and missing the abundant love of the Father in the story.

Here too both characters in the parable need one another. They both have part of the truth. The Pharisee is a good and upright person of faith, and with a little compassion he could nudge the tax collectors and others working with the Romans toward more fully living their faith.

The tax collector can also help the Pharisee to be more grounded in the very real "realities" that the most humble face in their times. In this way the piety and devotion of the Pharisee would become more grounded and animated by mercy and understanding, and the tax collector could learn from the Pharisee's devotion and religious discipline.

One final thought here: the passage ends with a word about being "justified." Luke in his Gospel believes that a true disciple of Jesus is one that knows deeply that they are beloved of God. Truly "knowing and experiencing" this communion with God saves us and heals us, and thus we are justified. Often we come to this experience of grace through the awareness of our sins and littleness. But this grace is always experienced as a gift: unconditional love freely given to us from the heart of God. The true and natural response to this gift of love is to want to give it away to others, to want others to know it also. This is truly what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and one "justified" and made whole by God.

Fr. Henry B. Beck, OFM / St. Francis Retreat House, Easton, PA.