

Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

Year C

Sirach 35: 12-14, 16-18
Psalm 34: 2-3, 17-19, 23
II Tim 4: 6-8, 16-18
Luke 18: 1-8

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For several years, I have been making my annual silent retreat at a hermitage in West Virginia, the Priest Field Pastoral Center. While walking through the woods during a cold, dark and damp day with the *Athe rod of God in my hand* (Exodus 17:9) with the sound of grinding gravel and damp, slippery leaves under my footsteps I thought back to my novitiate and the book that I read, *The Way of the Pilgrim*. The words of the Russian pilgrim on his journey meditated upon this mantra: *ALord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me.* The pilgrim describes how the constant repetition of this prayer led to these words becoming *Asweet to my taste.* These words remind me of the tax collector's simple request *AO God, be merciful to me a sinner.* Perhaps to him as well these words had a similar resonance.

These words resound with me in the need that I have for God in my life. Occasionally, I need to step back from the business of parish life in order to recognize my need and dependence on God. In today's gospel the Pharisee seems to have closed himself to the need for God in his life. He recited a list of things or duties as if saying to God, *ALook God, I have done everything on my own!* In contrast, the tax collector in his simple prayer for mercy, acknowledges his own need for God in his life and thus cries out to God in prayer for mercy. As our first reading from Sirach reminds us: *Athe prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds: it does not rest till it reaches its goal.* It is the tax collector's prayer that finds favor with Jesus in today's gospel.

In my walk and retreat, I have to come to look for Christ and confront the pharisaic ways in which I have acted out my priestly and community life. Like today's gospel we are challenged and I am challenged to cry out to the *AGod of Justice.* We want to ask for the justice of God, but as retribution. Rather, we ought to seek the justice in the Hebrew sense of the word, justice that makes us whole and complete in the sight of God and others.

The idols or gods of excess and consumerism have taken hold of our society. They have in a sense eliminated from our life the need for God. The success that many have achieved in life has failed to acknowledge everything as a gift

from God. The Pharisee needed nothing. He closed himself off to God. But the tax collector recognized the void in his life. Thus I wonder and ask: Have you closed off yourself to God?

Many find that it is easy to recite a litany of good deeds so that we can feel better about ourselves. We avoid any kind of topics or conversations that reminds us of our shortcomings. We decide with whom and in whom we will see the face of Jesus. Just as the Pharisee recited his litany of how good he is and does and yet, he scorns the tax collector for his shortcomings. Therefore, we avoid that person that drives us up the wall so that we don't have to come face to face with the Jesus in others. Precisely, it is in the face of the other, and the humble prayer that we make that we come in contact with Christ.

There is a need for a deep and sincere prayer. We need to actually beat our breast just as the tax collector beat his breast and prayed. This not meant to sound overly harsh or punishing, but rather hopeful that through a thorough examination of our life and behavior we come to know God. Lord, let me know myself, let me know you, says St. Augustine in his Confessions. When we come to know God we come to know ourselves and the will of God.

We ought to cry out like St. Paul I am being poured out like a libation and recall the words of Sirach: the prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds. When we pray, our wounds are exposed to the love and mercy of God. Just as the tax collector stood at a distance, with the eyes looking downwards, we must stand as a witness to a world that seem to have forgotten about God. Like the Pharisee, our society nowadays acts as if it has no need for God. We might benefit from some *divine reversal* or in other words come to the recognition that God's way are not necessarily our ways. The different occasions that we usually perceive as failures are opportunities for us to encounter God and God's revelation of his word.

In today's second reading we hear, the time of my departure is at hand. It is not only Paul's physical departure, but also my departure and your departure from the things that are puff up, empty and superfluous things that keep us away from God. In our humble prayers and our struggles through life we can recognize that the Lord stood by me and gave me strength. With the *rod of God in my hand*, and trusting in his mercy, I took a leap of faith during my retreat. It was then that I learned like the tax collector to make my prayer humble and make his words my own: O God, be merciful to me a sinner.

As we gather together around God's table, and share in this prayer of the tax collector, we recall that it is Christ that invites us to lift our eyes. It is Christ who call us to come forward to share in this Eucharistic celebration.