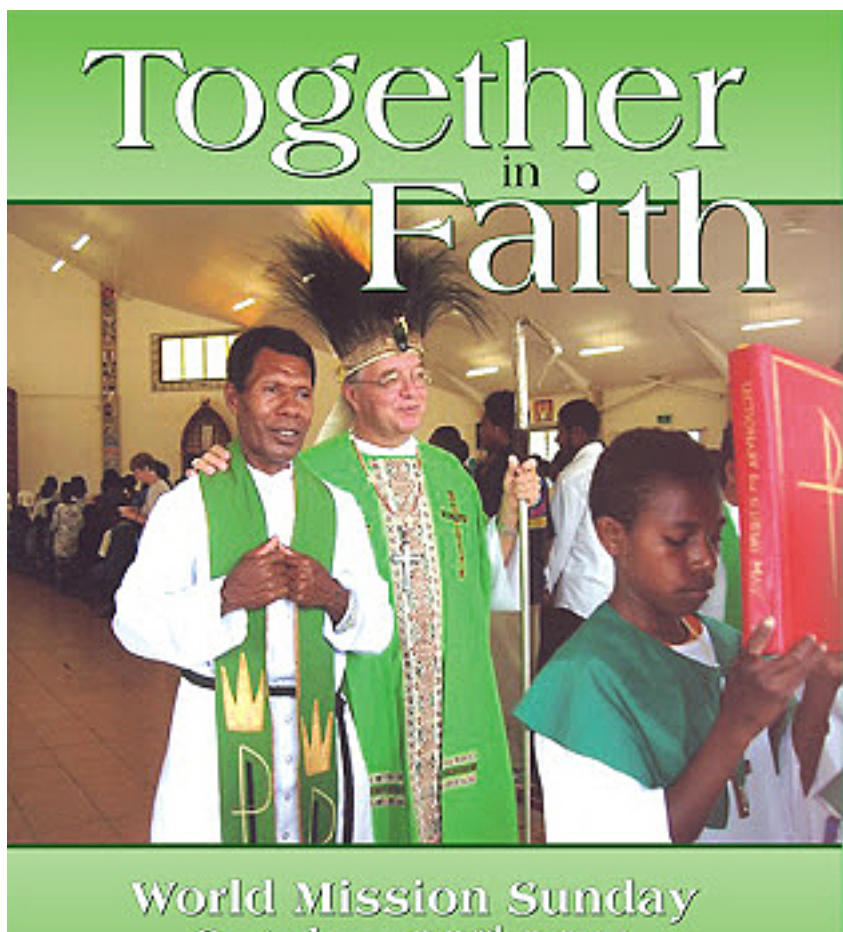


Commentary to the 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time - MISSION SUNDAY



The parable in today's Gospel strikes home with each of us. There are certain feelings that we have every time we walk into a Church. Few of us are like the Pharisee, self-assured in what he we are convinced is our innate goodness, sort of just checking in with God to remind Him how wonderful we are. No, most of us, perhaps all of us, are like the tax collector, aware of our own unworthiness to be before God. Sometimes we have an overwhelming feeling that we really are not good enough to be in Church, but we are afraid that if we don't approach God, we might get even worse. We live, we must live, as Sheldon Vanauken would write, "Under His Mercy."

It is in this frame work that we can best understand the parable and its relationship to us. We see our spiritual state in contrast to the Pharisee. We know that we need the mercy of God.

The Pharisee in the parable does not recognize his own need for God. He is very much caught up in himself. He is convinced of his own righteousness. As he takes what he is sure is his proper place in the Temple, he appears to be caught up in prayer, but in reality he is not giving thanks to God as much as he is delighting in himself. He doesn't ask God for mercy. In his eyes, he doesn't need God's mercy. He's too good. In reality he is committing the primal sin, the original sin of mankind, the sin of Adam. His pride has convinced him that he does not need God. He goes to the Temple to present himself in his goodness, not to ask for God's mercy and blessing. He leaves with nothing but his own spiritual arrogance.

The tax collector is aware of his own sinfulness and his deep need for God's mercy. As you know, tax collectors were not honest government employees like our IRS workers. Tax collectors were traitors

and thieves. Although they were Jewish, they sold their services to the occupying Romans. They had to pay their employers a set sum of money. With Roman soldiers standing behind their table, they collected whatever they felt they could get from the frightened people standing in front of their tables. There were no controls or checks placed on the tax collectors. They demanded far more than Rome mandated and became wealthy, basically using the Romans so they could steal from their own countrymen. How many people did the tax collector in the parable cheat? How many children went hungry? How many of his fellow countrymen, Jews, suffered so he could become rich with the support of the pagan Romans? Sinner was the appropriate name tag. The tax collector in the parable is aware of his sinfulness. He dares not lift his eyes to heaven. "Be merciful to me a sinner," is all he can pray.

The Pharisee asked for nothing from God and received nothing. The tax collector asked for mercy and received mercy.

Many times I and you come upon people who say that they have done something that is unforgivable. They say that they cannot go into a Church because they are convinced that they do not belong there. They joke about the walls caving in, but in reality, they are afraid that God will inflict an additional punishment on them for being presumptive.

To these people I and you must say, "Been there. Not only have done that, but am doing that, or at least being continually tempted to do that." Even a thoroughly consecrated Christian, a person who will someday be canonized by the Church, a saint, even St. John Paul II and St. Teresa of Calcutta needed to go to confession. A saint is a person who is aware of his or her need for God's mercy.

We have to tell those who fear returning to Church, "God is infinitely better at loving than we are at sinning." If we place ourselves in His hands, if we seek His mercy for everything from the major sins of our lives to our yelling at the dog, then God will raise our heads up from looking down on ourselves and send us out of the Temple, the Church, living in His presence, justified, living Under His Mercy.

"Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted," the Gospel concludes. God raises the lowly and the sinners to himself by giving his grace to them. Those who act as though they do not need His grace, will suffer the result of an empty spiritual life.

Reality. That is what makes the Catholic Church so reasonable. Reality. We are all sinners who under the grace of God, Under His Mercy, are being continually raised up to become a Church of Saints.

Christmas is not that far off. Every Christmas, people long for the spiritual and consider coming back to Church. Yes, many will only come for the day caught up in sentimentality. But there are some, no, there are many, who will come using Christmas as an opportunity to give the Church, to give religion, another look. Who are these people? They are your neighbors, your friends, and your relatives. Some of them, perhaps most of them, may feel very uncomfortable attending Church. They may feel that they don't belong among such good people, people who worship every week. Reach out to them. Invite them to join you on Christmas and beyond. Let them know that there is no one in Church who is not totally dependent on the mercy of God. Anyone who says, "I don't go to Church because I am such a sinner," needs you and me to say with all sincerity, "Come and join the rest of us sinners. He is turning us into saints." The first Christians referred to themselves as the community of saints, not because they thought they were so good, but because they were acutely aware that God is so merciful.

We cannot comprehend the depth of the love of our God. He sees each of us for whom we are, with all the warts and bumps, yes, but also with the love, conviction, courage and character, the virtue that is integral to our existence. God sees Himself in us, our unique reflection of His being. He loves us. He is far more concerned with extending us His mercy than He is with our sinfulness.

When we come to Church seeking this mercy, we leave Church living under His mercy.

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