

From the Pastor's Desktop

A Spiritual Reflection from Father Charles Puthota



October 23, 2022

Dear Parishioners of St. Elizabeth,

I would like to share with you my thoughts on the Word of God this 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Two elderly women in the front pew of their church were listening to a fiery preacher. When he condemned the sin of stealing, they cried out: "Amen, Brother." When he condemned the sin of lust, they cried out all the more: "Preach it, Reverend." When he condemned the sin of lying, they jumped to their feet screaming: "Tell it as it is, Brother. Amen." But when the preacher condemned the sin of gossip, they got very quiet. One said to the other, "He's quit preaching and now he's meddling"

Self-righteousness is more common than we think. Over 2000 years ago, Jesus addressed the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector "to those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else." There is a tendency in us to be quite sure of our own rightness and be smugly moralistic and intolerant of others' actions and beliefs. It is a false conviction that we are better or more moral than others, something entertained inside and expressed outwardly. Jesus addresses it through parables and, at times, in strong language.

Richard Crashaw, a 17th Century English metaphysical poet, who was also an Anglican cleric converted to Catholicism, has a poem on this Sunday's gospel: "Two went to pray? O rather say / One went to brag, th' other to pray: / One stands up close and treads on high, / Where th' other dares not send his eye. / One nearer to God's altar trod, / The other to the altar's God."

Crashaw's poetic interpretation captures Jesus' contrasts in the two men's posture and prayer. One brags while the other prays. One takes up position in pride while the other feels unworthy even to raise his eyes. One gets only as far as the altar while the other gets close to God. The parable seeks to persuade us toward the nature of our relationship with God, with one another, in particular, with the poor, and the practice of prayer.

The context is provided in Sirach where the poor of the world, the weak, oppressed, orphan, and the widow are close to God: "The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds." The rich and the powerful are on notice because with wealth and position there is a grave danger of self-righteousness and lack of need for God. The poor in their lowly status have God on their side because, as the psalm says, "the Lord hears the cry of the poor."

Jesus the prophet par excellence continues and fulfills the Old Testament theme of God standing by the poor. In his words and actions, Jesus upholds the poor and those crushed by society, culture, and even religion. He keeps company with sinners and tax collectors. He challenges the oppressive structures arrayed against the poor and suffering. Jesus calls people to an authentic and loving relationship with his Father and one another as essential for the Kingdom.

Three insights stand out. One, our relationship with God is based on grace, not on the merits of our deeds. It is not the quantity, but the spirit in which we live and love. Undeserved though we are, God shares his superabundant love with us freely and joyfully. Prayer is self-emptying before God who alone can fulfill us. Two, our relationship with one another is based not on pride but humility, not on comparison but compassion. We are all in the same boat of sinfulness. The Church is a fabulously sacred place to find our identity. As Charles Morrison has said, "The Christian church is a society of sinners. It is the only society in the world in which membership is based upon a single qualification, that the candidate be unworthy of membership." Three, poverty and suffering in the world are humongous and heartbreaking. God in Jesus Christ is stirred up to compassion, urging us to be his devotees in alleviating pain and healing the planet earth.

Your Friend and Pastor,

Father Charles Puthota