

3rd Week in Lent: Men's Fellowship Conference

Introduction

I hope you agree this has been a great day! Let me join you in thanking all those who organized this day. Most of them have already returned to their parishes, but let's thank the priests who so generously served as Confessors. I am also grateful to our speakers, who really opened our hearts and minds to the Lord. And let's also thank Calvert Hall for welcoming us so warmly!

Now to the Scriptures of the day, especially the Gospel, in which Jesus tells a parable, a story with a point. In it he contrasts the Pharisee with the tax collector. In the society of his day, Pharisees generally enjoyed good reputations while tax collectors were generally reviled as collaborators the Roman Empire, the latest superpower to have conquered God's chosen people.

Jesus overturned those stereotypes. In his parable the Pharisee who prayed, fasted, and tithed prayed badly and went home unjustified in the eyes of God whereas the tax collector's humble plea for mercy met with God's favor.

Locating Ourselves in This Story

It's easy to see why the Pharisees weren't too fond of Jesus! The Pharisees who heard this story felt the heat; Jesus was talking about them. He was condemning what Pope Francis calls "spiritual narcissism" a self-righteous, self-centered way of approaching God and living one's faith. When the Pharisee prayed, he made himself the center of the universe. He told God how good he was, that he was doing everything right, as if his good deeds could capture God and domesticate him. And when the Pharisee did refer to other people, it was only to condemn them. He

despised not only the tax collector but a good many others. The Pharisees heart was sealed tight, impervious to God's love and impervious to the needs of others.

So we may say to ourselves, that Pharisee had some nerve, implying. In saying that, we might also be implying that we'd never act like that Pharisee. But Jesus told us this story because it is very easy for us to be like the Pharisee. Let me offer you some true confessions in my own life. After a long day, when all the events and appointments are finished and if everything went reasonably well, I'm tempted to say to myself, "You did a great job today!" I only hope God has a sense of humor! Like the Pharisee, I'm evaluating the day on how well it went for me. I'm not wondering what God thought of what I said or did nor am I wondering if I served the mission of the Church and the needs of those I was sent to serve. Instead of bragging, I need to examine my conscience at night.

I think that's what Jesus is asking all of us to do when he tells us about the humble prayer of the tax collector. The tax collector was wrong about a lot of things, but he got one crucial thing right: he trusted in the mercy of God. All he said to God was "Have mercy on me a sinner." His prayer echoed Psalm 51 in which we say to God, "a humble, contrite heart, O God, you will not spurn." The tax collector took seriously what God said through the prophet Hosea: "it is love I desire, not sacrifice, knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." It is only when we are meek and humble of heart, only when our deeply conscious of need for God's mercy that we truly open our hearts to God in love and reach out, beyond ourselves, beyond our comfort zone, to love others, especially those who are poor and vulnerable.

The Example of Pope Francis

When I was reflecting on this parable, I thought of Pope Francis. I remember the day when he was elected Pope and stood on the balcony of St. Peter. He bowed his head in prayer and asked people to pray for him. Soon after his election, when he was

asked about himself, he answered, "I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon."

In bearing witness to his own dependence upon God's mercy, the Pope is making the Gospel attractive and accessible to all of us. For so many people, including ourselves, true repentance seems very difficult. Sometimes people stay away from the Church because they feel that the Church is just like that Pharisee who is sitting there in the front pew ready to condemn them the minute they walk in the door.

Pope Francis realizes that mercy is the best messenger of the Gospel. He is teaching us that if we want to attract people to Christ and the Church, we have to begin by acknowledging our own need for mercy and forgiveness. When we do this, the joy of the Gospel starts shining through. A bishop friend of mine was once asked why he's always so happy. Without batting an eye, he answered, "I'm happy because I go to confession every two weeks! I'm happy because God loves me so much he even forgives my sins!" That bishop is very believable.

So if we want to be part of the new evangelization, if we want to get our families back in church, especially our sons and daughters, we have to have in us the humble, contrite heart of the tax collector, not the arrogance and anger of the Pharisee. People are looking for love. Their lives don't make sense without it. It's true, they may be looking for love in all the wrong places but when they see the genuine article at work in our lives, well, then, we might be just turn out to be God's helpers in bringing them back to the faith. What we have to share is not our own righteousness but the mercy of God at work in our hearts doing more than we could ever imagine.

Humble Our Sinful Pride

We might say that the tax collector sums up what Lent is all about. In one of the Lenten prefaces, we say to God: "...you will that our self-denial should give you thanks, humble our sinful pride, contribute to the feeding of the poor, and so imitate

you in your kindness” (Lenten Preface III).

Today many of you made a heartfelt confession of your sins. You acknowledged your need for God’s mercy and forgiveness and you were absolved of your sins. This can’t be something we do only once a year. Examining our consciences each day and going to confession regularly is one of the best ways to experience the joy of the Gospel. It brings home to us the love of Jesus which is stronger than sin and more powerful than death. The more we experience Jesus’ love in our lives, the more his love will shine through us onto others and onto the world around us.

As we receive Jesus in the Eucharist this afternoon, let us ask him who is meek and humble of heart for the grace always to have a heart that is contrite. May God bless us and keep us in His love!