

HOMILY ~ 30th SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME OCTOBER 22-23, 2022

The famous actor, Gregory Peck, was once standing in line with a friend waiting for a table in a crowded Los Angeles restaurant. They had been waiting for a long time, and tables did not seem to be opening up very quickly. His friend was becoming impatient so he said to Gregory Peck, *“Why don’t you tell the maitre d’ who you are?”* Gregory Peck replied with great wisdom, *“No. If you have to tell them who you are, then you aren’t.”* If you have to explain to someone how you deserve special treatment, you are probably not going to come off very well.

In the Gospel Reading today, we hear the prayer of two individuals, a Pharisee and a tax collector. The Pharisee says, *“O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity – greedy, dishonest, adulterous – or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, and I pay tithes on my whole income.”* Kind of sounds like he is trying to tell God who he is. Maybe Gregory Peck should tell him, *“If you have to tell them who you are, then you aren’t.”* Kind of sounds like he is telling God why he deserves special treatment. I think there are three things we need to know about prayer. First, God knows who we are. There is no point in trying to look better than we are before God. Second, God loves us unconditionally as we are. I am very thankful that I do not have to earn God’s unconditional love. If that were true, I do not think I would ever be good enough. The third thing is that God never wants to leave us where we are. He wants us to be the best version of ourselves that we can be.

Let’s take a closer look at the two prayers. In fact, the Gospel tells us that the Pharisee *“spoke this prayer to himself.”* This is self talk. It may be true, but it is not a complete picture. It sounds like he is doing great, and there is no reason for him to do any better. He is already the best versions of himself. That is not what the spiritual journey is all about. We always want to be better. That is what God wants for us. God does not want to leave us where we are.

Now, let’s look at the tax collector’s prayer, *“O God, be merciful to me a sinner.”* This is a good start. The tax collector acknowledges that he has reason to do better. It depends on what happens after this prayer. Remember the first two points about prayer. God knows who we are, and God loves us unconditionally as we are. He cannot sit with the negativity too long. That is negative self talk; and if he continues ruminating over the past, he will never be able to move forward. We do this to ourselves sometimes. When we ruminate over the past, this leads to shame, that is not healthy. There is a difference between shame and guilt. When we shame ourselves, we conclude that I am a bad, evil person, which is not true or helpful. When

we feel guilt, we feel bad about what we have done but we can also identify how we can do better. A little Catholic guilt is a good thing. Notice we never talk about Catholic shame. If we cannot let go of the shame or guilt, we may need to go to Confession. That is what the Sacrament is about. It is a Sacrament of healing. It is about admitting our shortcomings and moving forward. We should not shame ourselves or others. That is what we do when we judge a whole group of people negatively. We are saying that they are all bad, evil people. When the Gospel was written, the Pharisees were seen as good spiritual leaders and the tax collectors would have been seen as bad, evil people. In reality, there were good and bad Pharisees and tax collectors. Be careful about judging and shaming whole groups of people.

What should come next in the tax collector's prayer is quiet time allowing God to communicate with him. We bring our faults, our sins, our struggles and challenges to the Lord and ask for his help. A few words about this quiet time. There is a difference between distractions, self talk and communications from God. Examples of distractions are: what am I going to have for breakfast; what am I going to wear to the meeting; what is on my calendar for today. Try to dismiss those distractions. An example of what you can do is go and look at your calendar, and then go back to quiet prayer. If what you are getting during prayer is all negative, that is from you not from God. That is self talk. Remember God already knew what you told him, and he loves you unconditionally as you are. Maybe a particular person or situation comes to mind, and you are not sure where that came from. Maybe this is not a distraction. Maybe you need to sit with this a while. Maybe you need to call that person. Maybe you need to examine that situation. We do not always get answers or solutions to the difficulties we are facing right away, but if you are persistent in prayer they will come. Remember prayer does not change God, prayer changes us. God does not want to leave us where we are. If you do not get an answer to your prayer right away, you will probably at least get a sense of peace knowing that you do not have to figure things out alone. I have been praying for at least one hour the first thing every morning for the past 25 years, and it changed my life. You are probably saying to yourself, "*You can do it because you are a priest.*" That is not true. You can change your life, too.

Love & Peace,

Fr. Jim