

On Giving Thanks

Two weeks ago, when we heard the story of 10 lepers, a different approach was taken in that sermon. The sermon looked at the in-between places that our life journeys take us and how Jesus meets us and finds us in those places. While this is only one of the many themes related to that text, it is not one that is typically preached upon. A more commonly preached theme for that text is one of giving thanks, a theme that is the main theme of today's Gospel text. Today, we will take a look at this theme of giving thanks through prayer by using the story of the healing of the ten lepers and today's parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector.

Before we begin comparing the two types of thank prayers, we must keep in mind that the Pharisee in the parable wouldn't be representative of all the Pharisees. Much like there are different 'kinds' of Christians, there were different kinds of Pharisees. Some, like Nicodemus, were sympathetic to Jesus and some, like Paul, even became followers of Jesus. So, as we read the Gospels, we need to keep in mind that not all of the Pharisees were against Jesus and not all of the Pharisees acted hypocritical as they are often portrayed.

With that in mind, how do the different prayers of thanks differ? The Pharisee does not acknowledge that God has given him gifts. He only recognizes what he is not - he is not like 'one of them'.

He then points out what he does, as if God needs to be told what he does. On the other hand, the cured leper recognized that God had indeed touched his life through Jesus. He saw the healing that he received as a gift from God. Recall that as he came back to Jesus, he was praising God and his position at Jesus' feet demonstrates that the leper acknowledges that Jesus is above him, that Jesus is not a 'normal' person. Leper gave thanks for what Jesus had done for him.

This response is similar to the tax collector in today's parable - he recognizes his limits, knows that he is separated from God and asks for mercy from God. Both the leper and tax collector look to God for healing, whether it is a physical or spiritual healing. They recognize that there are limits to what they can do on their own. Anything more than that, they need help. They recognize that their healing is not the result of anything that they had done, but it is actually from God and they give thanks to God for it. On the other hand, The Pharisee does not see his own sin, he believes that simply by following the law, he was able to have a right relationship with God. When he compares himself to others, he is showing how much 'better' he was than 'those others.' He does not do those things that other people do. Because he does not do those apparent, wrongful things, he concludes that he is better than the others. By belittling and knocking down others, by pointing out how bad the others are, he is puffing himself up, making himself seem better than he is.

But if we condemn the Pharisee, or even just look at him in a bad light, are we then not acting like the Pharisee himself, while demonstrating a false humility? The Pharisee made himself look better by pointing out the flaws of others. When we say that the Pharisee is bad, are we not making ourselves look better by pointing out his flaw? We try to differentiate ourselves from the Pharisee by saying that we would never belittle anyone like he does, even though in doing that, we are belittling the Pharisee. That is the trap in which we find ourselves facing if we are not careful in how we react to the Pharisee.

Maybe this is a subtle lesson from this parable - that those who are truly humble, don't brag about it, they don't speak about, they may not even recognize that they are humble. Those who say they are humble, usually aren't as humble as they think or want us to think. True humility is recognizing one's place in God's creation as well as recognizing that we do things that try to disrupt that order, try to do things to put ourselves in a higher place than where we really are. True humility recognizes that we cannot correct ourselves on our own, that we do need help and the only place to receive that help is from someone who is greater than ourselves. Just like the Samaritan leper who recognized that his healing was something done for him and to him, we should also recognize that Jesus comes to us to give us what we need and not just what we want.

Perhaps the best example of who we should try to emulate from this parable would be the tax collector. We should recognize who we are and what we do without comparing ourselves to anyone else. In other words, we take responsibility for what we do and accept the consequences of our own actions. We do not come up with excuses of why we should not be held accountable for what we have done, acting like Adam and Eve in the garden looking to place the blame for their actions on someone else. We recognize that we have sinned and ask God for mercy when God judges us for those sins.

In addition to not comparing ourselves to others and how much 'worse' their sins are compared to ours, we also should not qualify our sins, comparing them to other sins, acting like there are degrees of sins where some sins are worse than others. Whenever we sin, we are going against what God wants. Some people believe that it is either we are following God's ways or we are not and that in our humanity we tend to not follow God's ways. It does not matter if we tell a little white lie, or if we murder someone, both are sins against God and as such both sins deserve the same punishment from God. The point is, whether we ascribe to the belief that all sins are the same or whether we believe that some sins are worse than others, we must take accountability of the sins which we commit and turn to God for mercy.

Who are we most like, the Pharisee or the leper & tax collector? Do we build ourselves up by pointing out the faults and shortcomings of others and not recognize the source of our blessings; or do we acknowledge our own faults and shortcomings, realizing that we cannot overcome them on our own and turn to Jesus for help? Also, do we measure ourselves against others; either with an attitude that is self-exalting or even with a false humility; or do we stand before God, bowed down knowing our own failings?

The Good News is that with God's healing and blessings, we can achieve that for which we strive most - a lasting relationship with God through Jesus. Let us give thanks that we have a God who loves us so much that God wants to do anything for us to have a right, lasting relationship with God, even go to the grave and back.

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