

October 27, 2013 Pharisee and the Tax Collector Homily:

Dear brothers and sisters, in the literature of Hasidic Jews there is a memorable story of a wise and respected rabbi who came to a city in which two men competed for the honor of hosting him. Both houses were equally roomy and comfortable. But one of the two men had a scandalous reputation for his many love affairs and other sinful doings. He knew quite well that he was weak and, understandably, thought little of himself. The other man, however, no one in the community could accuse of any wrongdoing. With proud and stately steps, he walked abroad, thoroughly aware of his spotless purity.

The rabbi selected the man with the bad reputation. When he was asked the reason for the unexpected choice, the rabbi answered: "Concerning the proud, God says I and he cannot live together in this world. And if God Himself cannot share a room with the proud, then how could I!"

The setting for the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Lk. 18: 9-14) is the Holy Temple in Jerusalem. In Luke's gospel the Temple is a place of prayer and, even more significantly, the locus of the Divine Presence. When a person of faith enters the temple, he is overwhelmed by a sense of his own poverty and unworthiness. In the time of Christ, the tax collector was looked upon with scorn and condescension. He was a Roman collaborator who had an unsavory reputation for extorting money from his own people. Yet, surprisingly, he is the one praised by Christ. Why?

The parable speaks well of the tax collector's humility. First, he stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven (Lk. 18:13). Second, he beat his breast (a sign of true repentance) and third he prayed for God's mercy.

On the other hand, the Pharisee stands alone, praying apart from others in the temple (Lk. 18:11). He holds people in contempt, including the aforementioned tax collector; and assumes God's role as judge. He transforms prayer into an act of boasting. As noted biblical scholar, William Barclay has said "The Pharisee did not go to pray... He went to inform God how good he was."

An interesting anecdote turns up in a biography of the late recording artist and actor, Bing Crosby. In 1960, then Senator John F. Kennedy was running for the office of President of the United States. He had planned an important campaign stop in Southern California, where he had scheduled key campaign speeches. Two celebrities competed for the privilege of playing host to the future president: Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby.

Since Mr. Sinatra was the first to extend an invitation, Sen. Kennedy was only too happy to spend time with the legendary singer. But the Senator's close advisors insisted that he avoid Sinatra because of his alleged association with known mobsters. Senator Kennedy caved in to the pressure. He stayed at Crosby's home. But, strange as it may seem, all three men had skeletons in their closet. None of them was without sin. All were in need of divine Mercy. No one of them could boast of being more virtuous than the other! Let us bear in mind that at the beginning of Holy Mass we cry for mercy no less than three times: "Lord have mercy, Christ have mercy, Lord have mercy."

In the presence of our Divine Lord, we are all poor and unworthy.

One of the most beautiful prayers of the Eastern Christian Church is known simply as the "Jesus Prayer." It is very brief and a candid confession of human weakness. The prayer reads: "Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Let us ask ourselves how we conduct ourselves in the Divine Presence. What is our attitude in prayer? Do we fully appreciate the need for God's mercy?

Amen