

Thirtieth Sunday *per annum*
Year C, 2025

Sir 35:12-14, 16-18

2 Tm 4:6-8, 16-18

Ps 34

Lk 18:9-14

Humility and repentance

In the gospel, Jesus addresses a parable to a very specific group of people, “to those who are convinced of their own righteousness and despise everyone else.” The Pharisee in this parable does not come off well. What words might come to mind to describe him? Let’s dust off our thesaurus skills and see what we can come up with: sanctimonious, holier-than-thou, moralizing, censorious, self-righteous, haughty, contemptuous, scornful, supercilious, condescending, demeaning, patronizing, arrogant, disdainful, smug, dismissive, priggish, “judgy” ... hypocritical.

These are words that should never be used to describe a follower of Christ, even if we poor servants, we poor disciples might sometimes accuse ourselves of being this way, too much “like the rest of humanity – greedy, dishonest, adulterous.” Instead, daily we beg God to be merciful to us, poor sinners that we are.

But Jesus also gives us the example of the social outcast, the tax collector, whose humility he means for us to imitate, especially when we make bold to approach God in prayer. We must never approach God except with a deep sense of humility, whether we are praising him for his goodness and favor to us, or we are begging his mercy and forgiveness for our sins.

Humility is based on truth. And the truth is that God is God, and we are creatures, lowly and unworthy, except that he has redeemed us by his merciful love. This is what the Pharisee in the parable has forgotten – that whatever goodness and uprightness is to be found in him has come from God. And so, the Pharisee stands before God foolishly, mistakenly, unwisely, as if he were standing before God on his own merits, when in truth he stands before God only because God has allowed it, permitted it, deigned for him to stand in his presence.

Now humility is based on truth. But humility is not the same as humiliation. And humiliation has much more to do with ego and self-righteousness than it has to do with truth.

To hear it told by some mouthy non-church people, they don't go to church because churches are full of contemptible and prideful Pharisees, hypocrites, who think they're better than everybody else. Yeah, that's not the reason Mr. Mouth doesn't go to church.

Take it from me, from all of us, who are "church-people." We know that churches are much more full of lowly tax collector-types who approach God and others with humble reverence and genuine desire to live their faith in love.

Oh sure, there are some Christians, some people, who are many of these negative words that we used to describe the Pharisee, and who go to church, and for whom churchgoing is quite often a sad excuse for recreation and socializing. However, I suspect that

religion and churchgoing did not make them become like they are. Rather, already being harsh and prideful and contemptuous of others, they've just seized upon religion and churchgoing as a vehicle for ... being jerks. That's what they are, this tiny and sad minority. Like the Pharisee in the gospel. Jerks in need of God's mercy, but jerks. You know. Every family's got one. What can you do about it? They're family. And the sad thing is that they've probably got nowhere else to go. Who'll have them anyway, being as they are?

But churches are *not* full of hypocrites and Pharisees. This church is not full of hypocritical Pharisees. And it is *not* humility to let this untruth, when uttered, to pass by uncontested. It is a charge aimed at humiliation and intimidation. And humiliation, we said, is not humility. Humility is about ego and resentment, not about truth. And we are within our rights – more, it is our duty – to naysay these slanders when they are uttered in our hearing, and to speak the truth of things in charity.

The likely reason that Mr. Mouth does not go to church is explained to us in the gospel of St John, John 3:19: *“And this is the verdict, that the light came into the world, but people preferred darkness to light, because their works were evil. For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come toward the light, so that his works might not be exposed. But whoever lives the truth comes to the light, so that his works may be clearly seen as done in God.”* Now let's apply this understanding to the parable.

The Pharisee in the gospel parable does not want his wicked works exposed to the light, and so he tries to cast darkness over everyone else, so that by contrast he can appear to be shining bright, at least to himself. But the truth is that there is darkness in him. The tax collector on the other hand, he is the one who is doing a work in God. By his repentance, he confesses his darkness, his sin, and surrenders it all to God, and so is filled with light. His repentance is an act of holiness, pleasing to God. However much our sins are displeasing to God, our repentance pleases him more. Repentance is pleasing to God. Repentance is a work of light.

Mr. Mouth and his friends don't go to church because they don't want to repent, of whatever sin they won't name or admit to or give up, and in a church filled with repentant sinners, there is just too much light for them. So they obfuscate. They criticize.. They cast aspersions. They try to intimidate and humiliate. They are aggressive and try to confuse and shame. But this is only a ploy to cover their own confusion and shame, their lack of repentance.

In our repentance, in our prayer to God to have mercy on us who are poor sinners, we will be humble. But at the same time, and in all humility, we cannot pretend that the light of Christ in us, the light of God's mercy that justifies us, is something shameful, or hypocritical, or pharisaical. We cannot allow the light of the world – Christ in us, poor sinner that we are – to be hidden under a bushel basket just because Mr. Mouth wants to humiliate and denigrate and score points in his petty game with his little pals. No. Christ

has spoken and told us that we who follow him in humility, truth, and repentance, we are the light of the world. *"Your light must shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your heavenly Father"* (see Mt 5: 14-16). Repentance – sincere, honest, heartfelt – this is a good work, a work of light, that glorifies God before others.

So it is not humility to hide that light. The tax collector in the parable did not hide his light. He risked being seen by the likes of the Pharisees. He risked the Pharisee's scorn and contempt. But the lesson we learn from the tax collector is that the light must be allowed to shine through us ... with gentleness, with naturalness, and with the conviction that God's mercy extends to all poor sinners, even to the prideful Pharisee and the resentful Mr. Mouth, both of whom, God, in his never-ending love, is calling out of darkness and into his own wonderful light (1 Pt 2:9).

Here then, is our gospel charge: with sincere humility, to repent; and with gentle boldness, to be light, *"for ... the one who humbles himself will be exalted."*

O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.