



The Word ...

“The LORD is a God of justice, who knows no favorites. ...
The one who serves God willingly is heard; his petition reaches the heavens.
The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds...”
(from Sir 35:12-14, 16-18)

"Two people went up to the temple area to pray;
one was a Pharisee and the other was a tax collector.
The Pharisee took up his position and spoke this prayer to himself,
'O God, I thank you that I am not like the rest of humanity... the tax collector
beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'"
(from Lk 18:9-14)

Pondering the Word ...

“Does God hear my prayer?” I imagine most of us have asked this question at some point, particularly when an intention for which we have fervently prayed seemingly goes unanswered or is denied.

The readings today, particularly the gospel, are important and call for deep reflection. These passages are not about who does right or does wrong, who is moral or immoral, or who is more or less deserving of God’s response. They are about dependence on God and acceptance of God’s will.

It amuses me that the text reads the Pharisee “*spoke this prayer to himself,*” because that’s exactly what he does! Silently or aloud, he extols his virtues and exalts himself. He is sure that he is “*one who serves God willingly*” by tithing and fasting and avoiding sin. He thinks God has blessed him with his riches and status and that he deserves the privilege he enjoys for being a good boy. He is blind to his sin of pride.

But the Publican, one of the lowly that the Pharisee despises, pleads with God for mercy. He knows he is a sinner and undeserving, and that his salvation depends, not on anything he does or does not do, but on God. He goes away vindicated, knowing God hears his prayer. His petition reaches the heavens. He is aware of his humanity and his sinfulness, and he asks God for mercy and help.

Living the Word...

My book club is reading the book, *Barking to the Choir*, by Greg Boyle, SJ (2018). One paragraph really spoke to me and ties to our reflection today: “*Often enough, we get in the habit of shaking our fists at God and saying, ‘WHAT do you WANT from me?’ We are programmed this way as humans. But I suppose it would be more accurate to ask God this: ‘What do you want FOR me?’*” (p. 25). Good question to ask God in prayer: “What do you want FOR ME?”

Serving God willingly is not achieved by a list of “to dos and don’ts,” as if we could bargain with God to get our way. It is about accepting God’s will and what God wants for us, even when that gift is wrapped in a package we aren’t expecting or are reluctant to open. Jesus ended his intercessory prayer at Gethsemane with, “*but not my will, but yours be done.*” I’d guess he ended every prayer that way. A good habit to get into, don’t you think?

Personal Reflections and Ideas ...

Mon, Oct 24: *“Be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love”* (Eph 4:32-5:8). Most translations use the literal *“peripateo”* from the Greek: to *“walk in love.”* Paul uses this verb to indicate an ethical sense of conducting one’s life in love. I get that, but walking in love sounds much more real to me. **Reflection/Provision:** Most of us don’t do anywhere near the walking our ancestors did in going about their daily lives. Unfortunately, it’s more like Zooming in love, commuting in love, texting in love, sitting in a classroom in love! And God knows we need love in those situations as well: even more so! For me, to walk in love means to appreciate and respect the earth, to greet everyone I encounter with eye contact and a sincere smile and compassion if needed...to be an imitator of Christ as he walked on the earth. Where and when are you most challenged to walk in love?

Tue, Oct 25: *“When you eat the toil of your hands, happy you are and it is good for you”* (Ps 128, Hebrew translation). **Reflection/Provision:** There’s a psychological concept—self-efficacy—that is captured in this ancient verse. Self-efficacy is about one’s ability to do for one’s self; it is the basis for self-esteem. God, the ultimate parent, knows this and gives us the freedom to learn, to fail, and to bounce back. It is the model for good parenting. But it is also significant to consider this when we talk about the poor and oppressed, which is why acts of charity and advocacy for social justice and change are inseparable (see Sunday’s reading from Sirach). As Pope Francis preaches, the poor need the opportunity to do for themselves: access to arable land, fair wages, safe shelter, good education, clean water. This verse is not about wealth or material goods. It is about sufficiency and the ability to take care of one’s family. Look for opportunities to build self-efficacy in your own family or community. Accompany others in need to take steps to a better, happier life they can sustain on their own.

Wed, Oct 26: *“For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last”* (Lk 13:22-30). **Reflection/Provision:** I remember reading an article about a third-grade teacher who organized her classroom backwards by alphabet. Her last name began with *“Z,”* so she knew what it was like to always be last in line! Cute example of an enlightening message that calls for reflection. I was born into a life of privilege; not wealth—see yesterday’s reflection—but privilege: a stable family, good education, and a skin color that made some doors closed to me because of my gender at least easier to open. I take comfort that Jesus uses the word *“some,”* but I am reminded the privilege I have that (through no effort on my part) puts me closer to the front of the line, also compels me to use that privilege to better the lives of others less fortunate, not just for today, but for the future.

Thu, Oct 27: *“For our struggle is not with flesh and blood but with the principalities... with the world rulers of this present darkness”* (Eph 6:10-20). **Reflection/Provision:** This reading appears in the lectionary every two years, and each time I write the same thing, only with more urgency. *“World rulers of this present darkness”* who oppress their own people, wage war, and threaten global security. First-world countries that abuse and destroy the earth, complicit in starvation deaths of millions. It feels like our defenses of truth, righteousness, and peace are no match and yet faith call us to believe in God’s justice. As we heard a few weeks ago from the prophet Amos: *“I will never forget the wicked things you have done.”* Resolve today to be a living example of peace and truth.

Fri, Oct 28: *“The heavens declare the glory of God...Through all the earth their voice resounds, and to the ends of the world, their message”* (Ps 19). **Reflection/ Provision:** Go back to the psalm verse from Sunday: *“The LORD is close to the brokenhearted; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves”* (Ps 34). I think about the earth crying out in its misery, its spirit crushed underfoot by human greed and carelessness. I imagine God hearing those cries and the heavens resounding with the message: those who do evil, who pollute and destroy God’s creation, will be cut off from the earth. Is that a message humanity is hearing? Do what you can today—however small—to heal and nurture your small corner of Mother Earth. Listen to her voice as she pleads for rescue. What you do matters.

Sat, Oct 29: *Jesus went to dine at the home of one of the Pharisees; the people were observing him carefully* (Lk 14:1, 7-11). Why are they observing Jesus carefully? They are likely waiting to pounce on him making a wrong move, breaking a rule, or saying something heretical. **Reflection/Provision:** But what if there are some at the Pharisee’s home who are withholding judgment? Could it be that the Spirit has opened the minds and hearts of some guests, and they are observing Jesus, not to trap him, but to learn from him? Do I take the time to observe Jesus carefully, to learn and model my own life after his? Make a commitment to dig into the gospels each day. What do you observe about Jesus? Jot down a few notes as basis for prayer.