

THE SPIRITUAL LOSER OCTOBER 28, 2007

Do any of you remember a song by Mac Davis which was popular many decades ago titled “Oh Lord It Is Hard To Be Humble”? Part of the lyrics went something like this:

Oh Lord it’s hard to be humble
when you’re perfect in every way.
I can’t wait to look in the mirror
cause I get better looking every day.

To know me is to love me
I must be a heck of a man.
O Lord it’s hard to be humble
But I am doing the best I can.

I guess you could say I’m a loner,
a cowboy outlaw tough and proud.
I could have lots of friends if I want to
but then I wouldn’t stand out from the crowd.

Oh Lord it’s hard to be humble
when you are perfect in every way.

This song came to mind as I was reviewing the readings for today. Jesus is with his disciples. They have just had a discussion about prayer and the need for persistence in one’s prayer life. We discussed this last week.

In today’s gospel reading from Luke, Jesus tells the story with two of his favourite story characters - the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Both came separately into the synagogue to pray and stood apart from one another.

Who is the Pharisee? The Interpreter’s Bible Commentary says the Pharisee is a man whose main characteristic is his legalism or legalistic rigorism. Josephus, the great Jewish historian, informs us that the Pharisees were noted for their strict accuracy in their interpretation of the law and their scrupulous adherence to it. Pharisees genuinely worked at purity and righteous living through this rigid following without wavering, the laws of Judaism.

Josephus goes on to say: “the Pharisees, who are considered the most accurate interpreters of the laws, and hold the position of the leading (Hebrew) sect, attribute everything to Fate and to God...Every soul, they maintain, is imperishable, but the soul of the good alone passes into another realm, while the souls of the wicked suffer eternal punishment.”

The Tax Collector was hired by the Romans to collect very unpopular taxes. They as often as not extorted as much as they could to line their own pockets. Tax officers are never popular, even in our time; but the Palestinian tax collectors were an especially degraded and despised lot. The Jews who for pay participated in this occupation were regarded as base and despicable. They had sold their services to the foreign oppressor as against their own people, and they were deemed to be engaged in robbery. What could one say that was good about these men?

Jesus now tells this story about the two men. They were standing each in prayer, apart from one another, yet in the presence of other worshippers. Jesus tells us what the Pharisee is saying in his prayer: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes on all I get.” In all, he sounds like a good fellow working hard on being righteous.

Then Jesus relays what the Tax Collector was saying. Eyes to the floor, berating himself and beating his chest, he says these words: “God, be merciful to me a sinner” and leaves the synagogue.

The Pharisee was deemed the good, religious man by those around him. In the Pharisee’s eyes, the tax collector was a spiritual loser. It is interesting to note that the tax collector would also deem himself to be a spiritual loser.

Yet, Jesus said; “It was this man, I tell you, and not the other, who went home acquitted of his sins. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled; and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

The willingness of Jesus to eat in the company of tax collectors does not mean that he tolerated or condoned their activities. On the contrary, the extent of his compassion is displayed by his association with these fallen characters, in the hope of winning them for a better life. Just as the prostitutes whom he befriended were expected to respond to his guidance and return to a life of decency, so the tax collectors were summoned to repent and reform.

Newness of life was possible with Jesus. Witness the disciple Matthew who left his job as a collector of taxes and fees and followed Christ. Newness of life is always possible in the human life according to Jesus.

It is not easy for any of us to be truly humble as it is very difficult. Jesus never used the word humble to mean becoming a door mat for others to walk on. Rather, it is the need for us to see ourselves as others see us and not try to assume we are better than others.

Some of you may remember Minnie Pearl, a comedian performer on the Grand Old Opry from Nashville, Tennessee. She always came on stage shouting “Howdee!” She had a wonderful line in a story which goes something like this: I was humble once and I got so proud of this that I blew it. It is not easy to be truly humble.

In Paul’s Second Letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of his impending death by execution in Rome. He states that he has done all he was capable of doing.

“For I am already on the point of being sacrificed; the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith”

Then he goes on to say: “Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

As we have been speaking of true humility, these statements of Paul sound more like the old Pharisee he was before his conversion to a Christ follower. He speaks with a certainty as to himself. What Paul is saying is that he has done all he can in his life to serve God. There is nothing more he can do except now to give up his life to those who have tried to kill him for decades.

Paul is claiming for himself and for each of us, those promises of Jesus to go and prepare a place for us so that where he is, we may be also. Paul believes this and now at the end of his life, he claims the prize of a life lived for God. You remember that Paul as a young well educated theologian and Pharisee, even then had a burning, all consuming faith which drove him to try to eradicate the Christians he believed were following the wrong path. When he came face to face with Christ, he turned all his energy towards spreading the wondrous news that he had discovered. He became the great evangelist to the Gentiles, bringing thousands to Christ through his preaching, teaching, writing and establishing church congregations throughout the Roman Empire.

I find it interesting that Paul always reminded folks of his past with the message that God forgave him and conscripted him, a sinner and persecutor of Christ, to be his spokesman. If God so loved Paul, he can love and does love anyone who repents and turns to him.

Paul ends his letter to Timothy saying his life has been hard. When he was accused, no one stood with him. However, he goes on to say, “the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the word fully, that all the gentiles might hear it. The Lord will rescue me from every evil and save me for his heavenly kingdom.”

Paul ends his statement as he often had done with these wonderful words: “To him be the glory for ever and ever. Amen”

Spiritual losers, many people who have done everything they can to distance themselves from God and his commandments. Many of us feel spiritually lost at different times in our lives. Like the Tax Collector in the story, we keep our eyes down finding it hard to look at the goodness of God. Like the man, we can not and do not assume that God takes pleasure in what we are doing or what we have become. All we can say, as did the Tax Collector: “God have mercy on me a sinner.”

The joy of this story is the acceptability to God of that cry. It is the cry of the Prodigal Son when he returns expecting nothing and discovers a father whose love will never let him go. Past hurts were not itemized – only joy in the coming together again with the father. The joy of the father translates in real life to the joy of God when we come before him raw, aware of our shortcomings and our weak spiritual life.

It is not easy to be humble. While Paul humbled himself, he was still the powerful leader confronting men and women with the possibility of the new life he had found in Christ Jesus. While humble, he did not suffer fools gladly for he knew that the gifts God gave to each of us is the raw material we have to use for God’s glory in all we do.

What a wonderful faith we have been shown by Christ and the many Christians who have gone before us. God is indeed generous and patient with his creation. Like Paul, we can say with absolute confidence as a forgiven people:

To him be the glory forever and ever. Amen

Gary Magarrell

