

NOVEMBER 5, 2017

Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time

READING 1 [MAL 1:14B-2:2B, 8-10](#)

RESPONSORIAL PSALM [PS 131:1, 2, 3](#)

R. In you, Lord, I have found my peace.

READING 2 [1 THES 2:7B-9, 13](#)

GOSPEL [MT 23:1-12](#)

Jesus spoke to the crowds and to his disciples, saying, "The scribes and the Pharisees have taken their seat on the chair of Moses. Therefore, do and observe all things whatsoever they tell you, but do not follow their example. For they preach but they do not practice. They tie up heavy burdens hard to carry and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them. All their works are performed to be seen. They widen their phylacteries and lengthen their tassels. They love places of honor at banquets, seats of honor in synagogues, greetings in marketplaces, and the salutation 'Rabbi.' As for you, do not be called 'Rabbi.' You have but one teacher, and you are all brothers. Call no one on earth your father; you have but one Father in heaven. Do not be called 'Master'; you have but one master, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

HOMILY:

In the four gospels, those authoritative records of the life and ministry of Jesus, the word "Pharisee" is mentioned 89 times: Matthew (30), Mark (12), Luke (27), and John (20). As we know, the first generation of believers after Jesus composed and preserved the gospels for us. So, with such a high recurrence of these Jewish religious figures in the gospels, two questions come to mind: **FIRST:** Why did those early believers consider the Pharisees meriting such repeated recognition? **SECOND:** Why ought we care about the Pharisees? Here we sit, some 20 centuries later, in Waterloo IA and we're hearing about some long-gone religious group. What possible difference could this make?

To begin, the name "Pharisee" comes from the ancient Hebrew word *parash*, meaning "separated." The implication was that the Pharisees separated themselves as elite followers of God's law, definitely with a sense of superiority. These are religious experts, who, in assuming the role, chose to separate themselves from others who seemed to be lacking in following God's law. And by this very fact, "pharisaic" has come to mean "self-righteous." So . . . why did the early followers of Jesus take such pains to emphasize the self-righteousness of the Pharisees, and why would we care about them?

In a nutshell, it is because of the very real danger that the followers of Jesus can become like them. How can we become self-righteous? Think about the word: it means: I am right about things by my own efforts. But . . . being a Christian mean I can't be okay on my own and need

the help of a savior. But there are two dangers of the self-righteous: I'm too focused on others to recognize it, or too lacking in humility to see it in myself.

So, a perfect test to detect self-righteousness are the words to the self-righteous priests of from the Old Testament Book of Malachi, carefully paired with today's exploration of the self-righteous Pharisees. There, the prophet offers the remedy to the self-righteous religious leaders of his day, a message given him by the Lord himself. Through the prophet, the Lord speaks to these religious leaders: "If you do not listen, if you do not lay it to heart, to give glory to my name, says the LORD of hosts, I will send a curse upon you and of your blessing I will make a curse." The result of self-righteousness: not a blessing, but the lack of a blessing, a curse. We don't have the power to bless ourselves, and without listening to God's blessed way, we are heading for a curse.

So, The two remedies for self-righteousness, according to the prophet Malachi: listen to God and give glory to God's name. **Listen to God:** this is the essence of prayer. If we do not have some place, some dedicated place for daily prayer and then, when going there, remain quiet to listen to the voice of the Holy Spirit, we are in peril of self-righteousness. For, if we don't try to listen to God, the next loudest voice in our heads and hearts is our own. **Give Glory to God's name.** This is the very essence of the prayer we here offer: the Eucharist, the supreme act of giving thanks to God and then, behold, receiving his Word and Life. When we do so, we discover there is only room for One upon the throne of our hearts, and in giving Glory to God, remembering Him and praising him as Lord, we dethrone ourselves and enthrone Him. In doing so, self-righteousness flees!

The remedy to the Pharisee mindset? Jesus gives it to us at the end of the gospel: "...you have but one master, the Christ. The greatest among you must be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled; but whoever humbles himself will be exalted." In summary, we must dethrone ourselves in humility before the needs of others and enthrone as our sole Master Christ, which we do in our daily prayer, in our service of others, and then, supremely, when we give Him glory in the great prayer of thanksgiving of the Father we join here.

The 89 mentions of the Pharisees in the gospels are, each time, a warning against self-righteousness. For me, the perhaps the scariest thing in life is self-righteousness. And this is not the self-righteousness of others, which might be the first thing I might want to think about when I hear the word. It is **MY SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS**. And because I can't save myself, self-righteousness is literally deadly. In our prayer and praise of God, let us find peace and relief by laying aside any sense that our own efforts alone will render us worthy of life and love but that God can do what we can't. And let us rejoice in who you are: Mercy itself that alone can save us and give us the peace and joy that only You can give.