

Sermon Proper 25 Year C October 24, 2010 by Ron Kolanowski

A priest named Father Tim, who was rector of St. Mary's for 43 years died and was waiting at the Pearly Gates. Ahead of him was a guy in sunglasses, a leather jacket and jeans. Saint Peter says to the guy, "Who are you, so I can see if you are admitted into heaven." The guy says, "I'm Joe Cohen, taxi-driver in New York City." Saint Peter consults his list, smiles and says, "Oh yes, take this silken robe and golden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Now the priest stands before St. Peter. "I'm Father Timothy O'Malley, and have been a faithful servant of the Lord." St. Peter consults his list and says, "Oh yes, take this COTTON robe and wooden staff and enter the Kingdom of Heaven." "Just a minute," says Fr. Tim. "The man ahead of me was a taxi-driver and he gets a silken robe and a golden staff. I get this cotton robe and wooden staff. How can this be?" St. Peter replies, "Up here, we work by results. While you preached people slept; but while he drove people prayed." Well I hope that doesn't happen to me this morning. But I tell this story for another reason—it's connected to today's gospel.

Today's gospel reading appears easy to understand at first glance. The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in **Luke** is a favorite for those who want to chastise others regarding their sense of entitlement. Yet, this parable is about more than who should be humbled and who exalted. Embedded in this story is often overlooked message about being in true relationship with God.

The Pharisee described in the parable could not be any more different than the tax collector. He is a deeply religious individual, who has committed himself to the practices of his faith. We must take into account here that Judaism, unlike some understandings of Christianity, is a religion of loving observance. Performing specific practices expresses the intent of one's heart and faithfulness. In Judaism, three practices were (and are) considered to be of central importance: fasting, almsgiving, and prayer. This is why the Pharisee puts such an emphasis on them: "I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income". Notice that he speaks of fasting and giving while he is praying. For him it makes sense that because he does what is expected in living a faithful life, he considers himself righteous or justified.

Here's that word righteous again. As I've said before to you the idea of righteousness in the New Testament points to a relationship between the individual and God. When a person is designated as righteous, it means that he or she is in right relationship with God. How this relationship is understood varies somewhat in the New Testament, but in all instances, the writers maintain that God initiates this relationship. The same is true for Judaism.

The practices described in this passage then are responses to God's grace not a prerequisite for it. In this case, the Pharisee was righteous — in right relationship with God — before doing any of the actions described in the text.

The problem with the Pharisee's prayer comes out in **verse 11**: "*God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like*

this tax collector." It's like Fr. Tim in the story who thought himself better than the taxi-driver and should be rewarded more than him.

The Pharisee in this passage mistakes his circumstances with a divinely ordained caste system. In his mind, devout people like himself are part of God's "in group," while everyone else is excluded. In other words, the surprising issue we find in this parable is one of inclusion. Like the taxi-driver at the Pearly Gates, the tax collector is included in God's realm. All are included by God's choice and design.

Notice that the Pharisee stands alone when he prays. He physically separates himself from the others because he sees himself as better than them. The echoes of such exclusion can also be heard in Paul's farewell address in **2 Timothy**. However, we may be a bit more sympathetic to Paul as he recounts his own experiences with hardship, rejection and opposition. Yet, let's not forget that even Paul in the book of Acts identifies himself, *"I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees..."* while facing his opposition, the religious establishment and other Pharisees.

In 2 Timothy, Paul points out that *"the crown of righteousness"* is reserved for him because he has fought the good fight and kept the faith. It's easy to point fingers at the one who lifts himself up as "better than" because he is engaging in "good practices." What about those who feel they ultimately deserve a reward, or at least divine acknowledgment, for long-suffering and endurance of being excluded? Are they more or less deserving of God's favor because of their actions? **These texts invite the reader to look beyond a simplistic system of holy debits and credits,**

and really examine what righteousness means as a measure of being in true relationship with God.

The elusive message of today's parable is that all of us are part of God's group. While some may need to be humbled and others exalted, no one is excluded. **Joel** explicitly acknowledges righteousness as a divine initiative that is available to all human beings, irrespective of their class, race, sexual orientation, gender or status. In Joel, God promises not to allow people to be put to shame and includes "all flesh" in God's community.

Today's message...a message of inclusivity for all people and being in right relationship with God...a relationship initiated by God to us that assures us of God's never ending love no matter if we think we're better than others or humbly realize our place in relation to the divine. The point of my initial story reminds us that both the priest and taxi-drivers both got robes and were invited into God's heavenly kingdom...even if the priest put everyone to sleep on Sunday mornings. Amen.