

30<sup>th</sup> Week of Ordinary Time:  
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“Who Is Ready to Start a New Story?”

There goes Jesus again, turning everything upside down. He keeps switching the tables on us! He keeps rearranging the puzzle pieces. Why does Jesus do this? He wants us look at life more closely. He wants us to put ourselves in his stories. He wants to open our eyes to our own truth.

Today's Jesus story is familiar to us, maybe even more familiar than we think! We know the punch line. The tax collector is in the back of the church. He is a bad man. He has cheated a lot of people out of money. He doesn't give any money to the church or to anyone else. He's done a few other things in his life, too. What's he even doing in church!

The Pharisee has done what he could to be right. He has given money not just on what he has earned as an interpreter of the law but on his side jobs and lands, too. He has fasted 2x a week and Jewish law doesn't even demand that. He's never been unfaithful to his wife. He stands as a pillar in the community.

So why did the tax collector, according to Jesus, go home justified?

First of all, there is that one word... himself. The Gospel says that the Pharisee went into the temple and prayed “to himself.” He is proud of himself. He has marched right up to the front and reviewed all the things he's done so well. He has recited a profile which declares him separate from the rest of humanity. He has accomplished it all by himself! He has made himself good, at least in his own eyes. He is saved and he is the savior! He does not need God. He is closed off. This man does not need God's mercy, and he certainly does not need to be changed. What's more, he does not need to deal with the rest of humanity, the riffraff who are not as good as he is. He goes home untouched, unchanged, unjustified.

The foul little man in the back of church who everyone knows is corrupt has stolen from his own people. He's not given a penny to Church or anyone else. Now he has the audacity to come into the Church and the audacity to speak to God! Or was it the humility to quietly sneak into the back of church? Was it humility that brought him to speak to God? He needs God. He is bowed over, can't even lift his head, striking his chest, “It's me, my fault, I've sinned over and over, but You, O God, You can help me. I need You. I want to be changed. Please have mercy on me.” The center of this man's prayer is God. It's all about what God can do, what mercy God can give. This sinner wants God in his life and believes God can change him. Jesus says he goes home justified; he goes home a changed man.

One believes he has saved himself, the other believes that God saves.

One believes he needs no change, the other believes he needs to change drastically.

One prays proud words to himself, the other pleads with the God of mercy.

The Pharisees believes he has no connection with sinners. He moves along at another level, above that mess of humanity that is sinful.

A Franciscan friar, John, was sharing with some of us how he had always been really good in the seminary, a real “brown nose” he said. But when he was in training with the Franciscans, he and another novice hated the novice master. The novice master was rigid and tough. He made the young men work hard at menial tasks all day and was relentless in disciplining them. So the two started praying that the novice master’s mother would die. They figured that if she died, the novice master would have to leave them and tend to her funeral and her affairs. That wasn’t happening so then they decided to cut the brake lines on his car so the novice master would go careening off some hill and get hurt or killed. The problem was, though, that they didn’t know where the brake lines on the car were. Finally, John’s conscience got to him. John went to his novice master admitted that he should be thrown out for all the evil wished he had against the novice master...wanting his little old mother to die, wanting to cut his brake lines to kill him. The novice master hugged him and said, “John, I forgive you. But in your ministry as priest, don’t ever forget that you are capable of doing even the worst that someone comes to confess to you. We are all sinners in need of God’s mercy.”

Our first reading proclaims: “The cry of the humble pierces the clouds.”

This past Tuesday evening I returned from an 8 day pilgrimage. I had the privilege of leading healthcare administrators to Assisi and Rome to learn Franciscan values from the lives of St. Francis and St. Clare. While in Rome we attended, along with a few thousand others, the Sunday Angelus and reflection which the Pope Gives. He talked about prayer. Pope Francis said “We do not pray to convince God by the force of words. God knows what we need better than we do. In our daily journey, especially in difficulties in the struggle against evil outside of us and within us, the Lord is not far away, he is at our side. We fight with him beside us and our weapon is prayer, which makes us feel his presence along side of us, his mercy and his help. If faith goes out, if prayer goes out, we walk in darkness; we will be lost on the journey of life.”

Two people in Jesus’ story prayed, but only one received the mercy to begin again...to start a new story. Who here today, in this church, is ready to start a new story?