

## 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

October 27, 2019

Reflection by Sister Virginia Jung, OSB

Sirach 35: 12-14, 16-18; Ps 34: 2-3, 17-18, 19, 23; 2Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18; Luke 18: 9-14

*O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.* I think that is really the only reflection needed on these readings.

People use this short breath prayer, or variations on it, in centering prayer or as a mantra in meditation. Some other examples are: *Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. Be still and know that I am God. Repent, and turn to the gospel.*

Part of me wants to suggest, just take that prayer – *O God, be merciful to me, a sinner* and reflect on it for the 2 hours between lunch and the monastic chapter meeting. That would be enough for one part of me. The other part, feels obliged to expand on it a bit.

The Pharisees, so often the bad example in the parables or the villains in the gospels, were not unlike us. They were a group within Judaism that wanted to infuse every aspect of life with God's Law. That seems not unlike St. Benedict, who wanted to infuse every aspect of life with the Gospel, that is the reason to live in a monastery. St. Benedict used the closing verse of today's Gospel - *For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted*, as the opening verse of Chapter 7: On Humility. So for Jesus, the Master Teacher, it is the closing line of the parable and St. Benedict picks it up as the introduction to his teaching on humility, a text which we are blessed to have received and to be able to study and try to practice in our daily lives.

We are like the Pharisee, when we enter the chapel for morning or evening prayer, we go to take our position. It is so much a part of our lives, that we have a position, we have staked out a place

there. The tax collector does not have a place; he really is not even welcome and he knows that. The other, important difference is that the tax collector, somehow, is really praying, opening his heart to God and as Sirach says in the first reading, his prayer pierces the clouds, it finds its target. Consider that in this story, the Pharisee is not even really praying at all, he is so caught up in his negative thinking. Jesus says - "*He spoke this prayer to himself...*" Now does that mean that the Pharisee was praying silently and the tax collector out loud? Maybe. But when we hear the Pharisee's message, it does not sound like a prayer at all, rather more like an inner rant. He sounds more like he is taking God's name in vane, than praying. We do that sometimes, out loud or in our minds, when we are complaining about something and we probably do not stop to consider that we are misusing God's name. "Thank God, that I am not like...whomever". Depending on what's going on in your life, and certainly in the fractious nature of our society, you may well have engaged in some negative thinking about others this week, not unlike the Pharisee. Consider the possibility that the Pharisee was really a good guy, a decent human being who truly loved God, who regularly practiced his faith in sincerity, and that at the moment in the story, as he went to pray in the temple, he caught sight of someone there who he knew from experience to be an exploiter of his people and he reacted in his mind. The thing is, our thoughts matter. S. Meg Funk of Beech Grove has written an entire book on that topic. Jesus tells us this story to make that point. When you catch yourself engaging in negative thinking, having a prayer on hand like, *Jesus Christ have mercy on me a sinner*, is a good way to get yourself back on track. I know you know that.

The other thing I want to say is how very human it is to get caught up in negative thinking. As I was reflecting on the second reading St. Paul's second letter to his disciple Timothy, which is so

moving and inspiring, a lesson on willingness and patience in the Christian life, I wondered what was in the verses that were cut from the lectionary. This morning it flowed so smoothly, you would think it was all of a piece. But we heard verses 6-8 and 16-18. So it turns out that the missing verses, verses 9-15 are a rant. Right in the middle of this inspiring, heartfelt message to his disciple, passing the baton, if you will - St. Paul pauses to harshly criticize a couple of people and then continues on thanking and praising God. Why?? That is how human it is. I do not say this to criticize St. Paul. We know he was a faithful follower of Christ, who teaches us how to be better followers of Jesus. St. Benedict revered him and used St. Paul's writings to teach us in the Rule. But I am reminding us that our thoughts matter and when we dedicate ourselves to transforming negative thinking into loving thinking, we put on the mind of Christ. That is a challenge we can take up anew each day. *O God, be merciful to me, a sinner.*