

XI Trinity 2011  
Sermon – Saint Joseph Parish  
Father Craig Looney  
*1 Cor. 15.1-11 St. Luke 18.9-14*



Prayer is at the heart of Christianity...and today's Gospel is all about prayer and specifically how we pray.

We're all familiar with the Story of the Pharisee and the Publican. When we hear the word "Pharisee" today, we think "hypocrite", or "self-righteous" person. But the people who heard Jesus tell this story would not have had the same reaction to the word "Pharisee".

Pharisees belonged to a group of Jews who observed the Law and all its tenets, revered Scripture, believed the Prophets, believed in the Resurrection of the Dead, and believed the most important and greatest Law was to love God above all else and the second greatest was to love our neighbors as we want to be loved.

Jesus believed in all of those things, so he is by definition a Pharisee. So was Saint Paul...he identifies himself as such in Acts and his Letter to the Philippians. We might not think of ourselves as Pharisees...but we are. Pharisee isn't a bad word. Jesus doesn't have a problem with Pharisees...he has a problem with the arrogant and self-righteous attitude some of the Pharisees he met showed.

The Publican in the story was a "public worker" hired by the State (the Roman Government) to collect taxes and other fees for the government. They also issued building permits and business licenses. Yes, even in Jesus' time, you had to pay a fee to add a room to your house. Joseph, our Patron, no doubt paid taxes on his carpentry business.

Let's update the story a bit. A lawyer and tax collector go to church to pray. The lawyer stands in front of the Altar and thanks God for making him such a good person. He's not greedy or dishonest. He pays his tithe on time. He never misses Mass. He's faithful to his marriage vows. He's an all-around great guy...not a low life like everyone else. He's especially thankful to God he isn't like that tax collector over there.

The tax collector stays in the back of the church. He can't even bring himself to

approach the Altar, much less look at it. He works for a foreign government collecting taxes from his own people. He specializes in auditing tax records. He's even audited some of his fellow parishioners. They consider him an enemy...a traitor to his own religion. All he can say is "God, have pity on me, a sinner!"

Both the lawyer and the tax collector offer prayers from the heart. Everything the lawyer says about himself is true. Even Jesus doesn't criticize the lawyer for what he says...he criticizes him for how he says it. The lawyer wants God to congratulate him for doing everything he should be doing. His smug self-righteousness...leads him into thinking he is OK with God because of his own accomplishments, rather than God's mercy and love. Jesus makes it clear that kind of smug self-righteousness has no place in church.

Our tax collector friend is at odds with his own religion and he knows it. We get a sense from his deep emotional prayer he is troubled. He is a sympathetic character in the story and we want to know more about him. We do know what brought him to church. He knows he is a sinner and he knows he can turn to God for mercy and forgiveness, because he knows that's what God does...he shows mercy and forgiveness to all who ask and try to do better.

We might be quick to condemn the lawyer and be tempted to say to ourselves we would never act like that. We're more inclined to identify with the tax collector, the outcast. But then we miss the point of the story. There exists in each of us something of the lawyer and something of the tax collector. We all have a tendency at times to be self-righteous and thank God we're not like everyone else. We all need to pay attention to the tax collector to remind our selves we are completely dependent upon God's love and mercy and to pray with humility.

Saint Joseph Parish is a community built on prayer. We pray together at every Sunday Mass...we pray at home...we pray in the office...we pray at school. How we pray is as important as what we pray for or about. How we pray reflects what we believe and what we believe reflects how we should live.

And so...let us pray!

