

In the name of God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, amen.

Well, our stewardship season is upon us and I was asked by Father Mark this week to please incorporate the theme of stewardship into my sermon this morning. I was in total agreement with this request, until I actually read today's gospel a little more closely and realized the only mention of giving here is by the Pharisee, who brags about giving a full 10th of his income. But of course, the Pharisee is the one we're not supposed to emulate so the task is a little harder than it appeared at first glance.

But I think there's more to this story than meets the eye and that it will have something to teach us about it. But we may have to dig a little bit deeper.

You might be familiar with one of the most popular spiritual books, a spiritual classic. It was actually first published in 1884 after being discovered in a remote Greek monastery. It's called *The Way of the Pilgrim*. It is about a young man who went on a walking journey through Russia in order to learn how to pray without ceasing, as St. Paul calls us to do in his letter to the Thessalonians.

While he's on his trek, the pilgrim happens upon an old monk who finally imparts the wisdom that he's been seeking, and the pilgrim writes this in the book. "He took my request kindly and asked me into his cell. 'Come in,' said he. We went into his cell, and he began to speak as follows. 'The continuous interior prayer of Jesus is a constant uninterrupted calling upon the divine name of Jesus and this appeal is couched in these terms, 'Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner.' He said, 'One who accustoms himself to this appeal will experience as a result so deep a consolation and so great a need to offer the prayer always that one can no longer live without it and will continue to voice itself within him of its own accord. And now do you understand what it means to pray without ceasing?'"

So he describes in the book the way the monk continues to help him understand this simplicity of praying always in these words, "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner." Of course, he starts his trek, and he continues to repeat this prayer over and over and over again.

So, you might know that this simple prayer has become known all over the world. It's called the Jesus Prayer. There are thousands of websites dedicated to it. You can watch videos about it on YouTube. There are people

all over the world who have totally centered their spiritual lives around that simple prayer that comes out of this classic.

But it's right from scripture. As you look a little bit more closely, you probably noticed this is essentially the words of the publican that we read in Luke 18.

Meanwhile, in the gospel account we also read, of course, about the Pharisee. Now he's praying in the temple alongside the publican, the Pharisee, of course, being a religious leader, but his prayer is rather different. He thanks God that he is not like anybody else, and he is not like that man, the sinner, the tax collector whom he despises and holds in contempt. The Pharisee, of course, sees himself as righteous because he keeps the ritual observances of the law so well. He even lists them out in case God forgot. "I fast twice a week, I give a whole 10th of my income."

The Pharisees' lives were really hemmed in by these religious practices. They were meant to reduce their chances of ever making any mistake or ever sinning in error. So, their entire lives are centered around these practices and they were extremely dedicated. In fact, the Pharisees make all of us look like spiritual slackers to the highest degree. They practice their religion with rigor.

In reading Jesus' parables, we're always invited to see ourselves in the characters and I believe the goal for us initially is to see ourselves in the Pharisee. I mean Jesus is talking to religious folk. That's us. We're the people. Look, we're the ones here at church today. Where's everybody else? Performing pillow worship? We're the good ones. We're here. We're part of Jesus' in crowd, right? The Pharisee himself was trying to do the right thing, like we are. He was trying to be on God's good side, like we are. What's so wrong with that?

Of course, the problem isn't trying to be good. The problem isn't the practices, it's the perspective. The perspective of the Pharisee, and I would say many church folks, many religious people, is viewing our lives as though we live on a scale of good and evil deeds, as if God is weighing our actions and our lives on this scale, so that if we just do enough good, we gain merit with God. And if we do enough good, then, "Well, okay, I live rightly. I live according to the rules. I guess I could be smug and prideful and self-righteous. I guess I could look down on others who don't do that."

Of course, that's what Jesus is getting at. He's come to reveal to us that God is a God of mercy and love and doesn't relate to us like that at all. There is nothing we can do, I mean I hate to break it to some of us, nothing we can do to make God love us any more or love us any less. It is all grace, and we are reconciled to God by trusting in that amazing grace and mercy demonstrated for us by Jesus.

Of course, I know the church, we're really good at giving lip service to that idea. We often talk about this grace and this faith, but we often live as though life was not grace, as though it really did depend on us when it all depends on God.

Jesus is talking to us, those of us here at church in this parable, because like the Pharisees, we can go around missing the whole point of our faith for a long time. God is merciful and God justifies sinners, people like the tax collector.

So our goal for the parable then is to move from seeing ourselves in the Pharisee, to identifying ourselves as the tax collector, as the publican humbly recognizing his need for God's mercy and so finding it. When we recognize our need for mercy, when we realize we are really not any better than the next guy, we gain that humility. We know we've fallen short and then we, like him, can fall to our knees and say that Jesus prayer. "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner."

Now I know that word sinner. It can sound a bit quaint or maybe even a bit medieval to us. Talk about sin and being a sinner in today's age conjures up images, people self-flagellating, people with sandwich boards, maybe even self-hatred and shame. But that's a terrible misrepresentation of what sin is, not the way it's described in the Bible at all.

The origin and true meaning of sin in Hebrew is the word chatta'ah. This word has a very clear meaning. A lot of Hebrew isn't very clear by the way, but this one is. It just means to miss the mark. It's like aiming for a target and not hitting it.

Think of holding a bow and arrow. My kids love bow and arrow toys. Think of holding a bow and arrow and aiming for the bullseye and just missing it. We might miss the target by a lot or just a little, but that's what sin is in the Bible. That's what it means. Missing the goal, missing the mark God has for us.

So, to say that I am a sinner, which I am in a biblical sense, is to say I missed my target, I missed my mark. It is not a word of self-hatred. It is practical realism.

Think how much practice it takes to hit a bullseye and with that visual in mind here again the words of the publican, the Jesus prayer. "God have mercy on me, a sinner," and simply admitting we miss the mark or that we at least sometimes miss the mark or have a problem hitting the target.

It's a bit like step one in the 12 steps. Admitting the problem, we find we're now on our way to coming to terms with the good news of the Gospel, understanding who we really are and all the ways we missed the mark allows us the grace of falling into the soft place of God's mercy, knowing God justifies us. Not because we're perfect or righteous or we follow all the rules or we go to church, but because God is radically merciful and loving and sent Jesus to show us that.

It is embracing that loving mercy that we are able to then extend that mercy to others. Our perspective changes. We live out our faith and then our actions become good. Not because we're trying to one up somebody else or prove ourselves to God or even prove ourselves to ourselves, but because we're so profoundly grateful and we are freed from the burden of arrogance on the one hand, or guilt and shame on the other.

Right down the middle, that's where the freedom is. That's where we find the grace and I think that's what brings us full circle to stewardship. Because when we realize both our true nature and God's radical love and mercy isn't the obvious response one of gratitude and generous giving back and outpouring of thanksgiving to God?

What do you think would happen if for one month we all practice the Jesus prayer, reciting those humble words of the publican every day, embracing the good news they bring? How would it transform you and us and the church, the whole church worldwide and our attitudes towards ourselves and God and other people?

I really believe that simple prayer, the Jesus prayer, can create a revolution of transformation and embracing this amazing grace will change our life.

Thanks be to God.