

HOMILY

The Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary time

October 28, 2007

10:00 AM Liturgy

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St. John the Evangelist Parish

Davison, Michigan

The famous actor, Gregory Peck, was once standing in line with a friend waiting for a table in a crowded restaurant in Los Angeles. They had been waiting for some time and the people seated were taking their time. Peck's friend became impatient and he said to Gregory Peck, "Why don't you tell the maitre'd who you are?" Gregory Peck responded with great wisdom: "No, if you have to tell them who you are, then you aren't!"

That's a lesson that the Pharisee in our Gospel apparently never learned. His prayer, if it can be called that, is largely an advertisement for himself. He would have done better had he had Gregory Peck there to whisper in his ear that if he had to remind God who he was, then he wasn't.

We all have something to learn from the story that Jesus tells us in today's Gospel. The first thought is that God knows who we are. We don't have to do a snow job on God and sell ourselves to him. Like the line in the Christmas song about Santa Claus, "He knows if you've been bad or good...." God know us, but God's knowledge of us goes much deeper than that. He knows not only our actions, but our motives, our intentions, our deepest and most intimate secrets. He even knows what's in the depths of our unconscious minds. The Psalmist said it well:

*"While I was in my mother's womb,
while I was being created in secret,
behold, O Lord, you knew me altogether."*

Such knowledge can be a frightening thing if we operate on the "God rewards the good and punishes the bad" philosophy. If that is the way things are, then I'm in trouble, because I've got things inside me that I wouldn't want anyone else to know. So, if I think that my acceptance of God depends on him not knowing about who I really am on the inside, then I'm lost.

That's why the good news that God knows exactly who I am better than I know myself is such a liberating piece of good news. I don't have to pretend. I am who God knows me to be. I don't have to be afraid of him finding out something that I'm ashamed of. I don't have to close off a part of my life to him; he knows me with a knowledge that is deep and wonderful and intimate and infinite. But close on the heels of this truth comes the next part. God not only knows who I am, he accepts me as I am.

God accepts us as we are. There's not a sin too dark, not a deed too awful, not a thought too horrible for God to forgive. What cuts us off from God's forgiveness and the freedom that such forgiveness brings is our thinking that we have to justify ourselves. Trusting in our own righteousness does not bring God's verdict of "not guilty." Trusting in God's righteousness does. But if we say that God justified the ungodly, doesn't that appear to condone bad or sinful behavior? If God doesn't require us to change before he accepts us, then what's the use of being good at all? Why not sin boldly and have a good time? After all, the Scriptures say that there is pleasure in sin, for a time.

But here the third truth comes to play. God knows who we are; he accepts us as we are; ***but he never leaves us as we are.*** When God justifies us on the basis of our faith in him, he also transforms us and makes us better than we were.

The theological or biblical term for God's forgiving and claiming work in us is *justification*. The word for God's cleansing and purifying within is *sanctification*. God starts with us just where he finds us, whether in the palace or the pigsty, but he never leaves us there. God's purpose is not just to rescue us from hell but to get us ready for heaven. So God is in the business of making us holy.

That is what we celebrate this coming Thursday on the holy day of All Saints—maturity in Christ, spiritual adulthood, perfection in love—God's work in each of our lives when he justifies us or makes us righteous.

This sanctifying work of God's spirit within us does not turn us into stained glass saints—people who walk around piously with their hands folded in prayer all day. God's work within us is the most practical, down-to-earth work imaginable. When

you and I open our lives to his gracious presence, when we no longer trust in our morality or good behavior or will power, we find ourselves becoming more loving toward others.

- ◆ People with bad tempers find that God’s spirit within them enables them to control their temper.
- ◆ People with enslaving habits, like alcoholism or an addiction to gambling, find a resource that is beyond themselves and a source of strength to overcome those diseases of the soul.
- ◆ People with too much love of money and material things find that their values begin to change.
- ◆ People with deep insecurities and low self-esteem begin to see themselves and love themselves as God loves them and sees them.

This doesn’t happen all at once. Discipleship, holiness, spiritual maturity, whatever you want to call it, is a life-long process. It’s a journey. We don’t become saints overnight, but we do become transformed. That’s the purpose of the Christian life—becoming transformed into the image of Christ.