

The Rev. Michael C. Fedewa
Sermon for October 28, 2007
Proper 25C
Jeremiah 14:1-10, 19-22
2nd Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18
Luke 18:9-14

Whenever I am asked to offer a “humble opinion”, in fact whenever I offer one even that has not been asked for, I will usually build up to it by offering some kind and flattering preliminary remarks. “But” all of us know that the most important words in an opinion are those that come after the three letter word “But”. Everything that comes before might be nice, it might make us feel good, but.....What really counts, what really matters is that which comes after “but”.

It was a great meal mom, but.....The meat was a bit overdone.....

Great idea dad, but..... It is really a bit out of date.....

I really liked the movie but..... I fell asleep for the last 20 minutes.....

We really like the house, but.....we were looking for something a little more in our price range.....

I really had a wonderful time, and I think you are a great person, but.....I wish we could just be friends.....

It was a great sermon Mike, but....(you fill in the blank.)

What is true about the word “but” when we are offering our “humble opinions” is also true when we are offering our prayers. Most prayers at some point get around to addressing God. Whether we are praying about the weather, an illness, a request, a concern, or something we are thankful for, soon or later, we get around to voicing these prayers to God. God is the given in prayers. In our prayers, often the most important words we say come after we say “God”.

In our Gospel reading this weekend, the Pharisee and the tax collector are praying, they are addressing their prayers to God. But, do you notice the words which come immediately after the Word, God. For the Pharisee, the next word is I. He can hardly wait to get the most important subject of the prayer. “God, I”. Do you notice the words that follow, “I”? “I thank you that I am not like other people. “ The arrogance and the pride are really quite chilling aren’t they.

The tax collector meanwhile, also begins his prayer addressing God. But, immediately after invoking God’s name, the tax collector begs for mercy. His humility is almost as chilling as the Pharisees arrogance.

It is important to realize that the Pharisee had reason to be proud. He was a man who did his duty. He prayed, he fasted, he tithed. Part of me would love him to be in this parish. I would recruit him in a minute to serve on the vestry, to give our stewardship talk. Heck, I would probably send him off to seminary. And, the publican was a scoundrel. Tax collectors in those days were traitors. They collected taxes for the occupying empire of Rome. They had earned the hatred that came their way. They were thieves. They skimmed money off the top of the taxes for themselves. They were extortionists. If they knew your dark secrets, they would use that knowledge to blackmail you into giving them more money. The more dirt they had on you, whatever it took, the more money they got, the more money it meant for them. The publican was every bit as despicable as Jesus makes him out to be. He deserved to be on his knees, face to the ground begging for mercy.

But, what is most important is not what he has done, but his prayer. “Be merciful to me a sinner.” The

Pharisee trusts in his self righteousness. The tax collector trusts in God's mercy.

But, dear fellow sinners, the Gospel sets a trap for us. The trap of the Gospel comes if we begin to choose sides.

There is a story told about a Bible study which was held at a church. The people had a great discussion of the story. And, at the end, there was time for prayer. A very respectable and well loved member of the congregation began the prayer. "God, we thank you that we are not like the Pharisee."

To avoid the trap in the Gospel, we must face the truth that we are like other people. I know that there are times in my life when I can be just as proud, just as arrogant as the Pharisee. I know, that there are times in my life when I can act just as despicably as the tax collector. I know that I am quite capable of being just as sinful as the worst. In truth, the most honest prayer I can pray arises out of my need for God's mercy.

Our readings from Jeremiah and Timothy certainly take up the same theme today.

Jeremiah speaks concerning the drought that ravaged his nation at the time. The cisterns are empty, the ground is cracked. The farmers are dismayed. The animals in the forest abandon their young. What makes the drought worse is the people of Israel knows that they have brought this on themselves. Their sinfulness have brought them to this time of terror.

We know what it is like to be Jeremiah, and the people he is speaking to. As we gaze upon the fires, upon the droughts that plague our world today. As we gaze upon so much disaster in our world today, we know that human kind bears responsibility for the shape of our world. We know that we share some of the responsibility for the fires in our life. We know, that as citizens of a small and shrinking world, we are like every one else. We cannot escape the terrors of our day. Whether drought, or fire, or violence, or MRSA, the troubles that plague others in the world, plague us as well.

Our hope rests not in our goodness. Our confidence rests not in arrogance or pride. Our hope rests not in the belief that we are different from every one else. Our hope and confidence rests in the faith that God is in the midst of our world. God is in the midst of us, and will not forsake us. Our hope and our confidence rests, that like Paul, the Lord, in his mercy will rescue us from the punishment we deserve. Does this mean that disease or destruction or death will not come near to us? Unfortunately, no. Disease destruction, and death fall on all. But, we believe that it does mean that in the end, these terrors will not separate us from the Love of God. In the end, by God's mercy, we will triumph over all disease, destruction and death.

So, fellow sinners. We acknowledge our sinfulness and we give thanks.

We acknowledge that we are as arrogant and proud as the Pharisee. But, God we give thanks that in your mercy, you love us still.

We acknowledge that we are like the thieves, the rogues, the adulterers and even like the tax collector. But, God, we give thanks that in your mercy, you love us still.

We acknowledge that we are like everyone else and that we deserve your just punishment for our sins.

But, God, we give thanks that in your mercy, you love us still.
