

Two Men Went Up ... to Pray

In the name of him alone through whom our heavenly Father answers prayer, dear friends in Christ. In my travels this last week, I had occasion to take the MAX, which is the light rail mass transit that serves Portland, Oregon and its satellite communities. It's like an above ground subway. With my civil engineering background, it struck me as a very well designed and efficient system. Anyway, I had a long ride and not much else to do but to engage in some people watching. It was interesting because the cast of characters was constantly changing as at each stop some folks got off and others got on. All kinds of people: there were businessmen and women, blue collar workers, shoppers, college students, tourists, some folks clearly down on their luck; people of all ages, races, and ethnicities.

Immediately it became clear that there were several unwritten protocols in effect. Though we're all on the train together, there's no interaction with other passengers unless you got on with them as part of a group. These are city folk used to being surrounded by strangers. They keep to their own business and pretty much ignore everyone else around them. The smile and friendly hello granted to strangers that's standard procedure around here is unknown to them. Instead, they seem to go out of their way to avoid making eye contact with anyone – which was hard to do: in the center section of the car where I was sitting, there were half a dozen seats facing each other on opposite sides. Unless you were looking at your shoes or the ceiling, you pretty much had to be looking at someone else.

So I'm taking all this in when we come to a stop downtown. I'm on the far right of the row of seats, and the two sitting next to me get off, leaving some open spaces. Just as the doors are about to close, two young fellows (literally) stumble onto the train. And for a few brief seconds before the unwritten rules said you had to look away, all eyes were on them. Where do I begin to describe them ...?

Early twenties, I should guess. Male. Caucasian. Perhaps a bit taller than average and of slender build. Both dressed all in black; one wearing a hood over his head, the other a dew rag out from which flowed long, brown, ratty dreadlocks. Like walking hardware stores, they were: their trousers adorned with chains that looped here and there with no discernible pattern or purpose, and lots of pockets from which protruded the brightly colored handles of various tools: a channel lock on the thigh, a lineman's pliers on the calf, others scattered about here and there. Again, these seemed to be there for no practical purpose other than decoration. Their faces were covered with small, geometric tattoos – very crudely (and probably self) applied. They looked like they had been designed by a four year old who'd studied under Pablo Picasso. Both had a vast array of facial piercings that held small trinkets and rings, but these were fairly conservative (if you can say that). What really captured your attention were the nose rings they wore. I'm not talking about a little stud in the side; no, these were monstrous: great big thick heavy pewter horseshoes that could easily have served as door knockers. I'm not exaggerating. Your first thought was, "That's gotta hurt"; followed by, "How do they manage to eat with those things hanging in front of their mouths?"

That they both were so similarly costumed suggested that this was the trending fashion of a particular subculture (I have no idea which). But if the group goal was to incite shock, revulsion, and maybe a bit of fear (or in my case, pity), well, then they definitely succeeded.

They spotted the empty seats to my left and made toward them with some difficulty, their journey complicated because the train had begun to move and because they seemed to be impaired either by the influence of alcohol or some substance stronger and decidedly less legal. When they plopped down, we learned that another custom of whatever tribe they were members of was to be free of modern notions of personal hygiene. Fortunately, ventilation in the car put me upwind of them; but I could see my fellow passengers covering their noses with scarves or kerchiefs and trying to suppress the reflex to gag. Only once did I get a good whiff. It happened when the train stopped abruptly and the hooded one next to me fell over into my lap.

You should have seen the look of horror on the faces of the other passengers. This was a serious breach of train riding etiquette. More than that, as I described, these were some pretty rough looking customers; their appearance practically screaming defiance, rebellion, maybe even criminality. Everyone was watching to see what was going to happen next – expecting some kind of altercation. But that's not what happened. The hooded one sat back upright and in a very kind and gentle voice apologized to me profusely. And then he reached into one of the few pockets he had that was not occupied by a tool and procured a twin package of smooshed Twinkies. "Would you like one?" He asked. I said, "You're very kind to offer, but no thank you." He then proceeded to offer the Twinkies to everyone else in the car. Not surprisingly, there were no takers.

But my whole point in telling you this is what he did was completely unexpected. Everyone there had made severely negative judgments about these guys based solely on their ... *unconventional* appearance and ... *earthy* aroma. By looking at them we thought we could read their character. We were wrong. They looked frightful and smelled terrible; but they proved to be pretty decent guys.

And that brings me to today's Gospel in which Jesus tells of the Pharisee and the tax collector both of whom went to the Temple to pray. Now, we know the punchline in this story, that it's the wicked and hated tax collector who confesses his sin and prays for God's mercy that goes home justified in the sight of God; while the Pharisee who boasts of his goodness before the Lord returns to his home still steeped in sin – not the least of which is his monumental self-righteousness. We know the story, so it seems obvious to us. But it would not have been obvious to Jesus' original audience.

No, they would have been shocked and offended to hear it. "Wait, wait, wait – what do you mean the tax collector was justified? You can't be serious, Jesus. Don't you know what a scoundrel that guy is? The kind of evil he's been up to? Tax collectors are the worst. They're traitors to the nation and thieves to their neighbors. And the Pharisee – he's the good guy. He has every right to be proud of himself. He's the kind of guy who does great things for the Lord. How can you say *he's* not justified?" They would have made their judgment about these two men based only on the visible externals.

And again, because we already know the answer Jesus gives, we think of it as a no brainer. We've heard it many times: Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. It's the way the kingdom of God works. All must recognize that we have sinned and fall far, far short of the glory of God. And all of our imagined righteous deeds, the best we have to offer, are stinking filth in the eyes of the Lord – and doubly so because according to our fallen reasoning we think that he ought to be pleased with them. No. They are sins every bit as damnable as murder, adultery, theft, and idolatry. And to the degree we trust in them to add to our righteousness, they must be confessed as sins.

There is only one solution: and that is to humbly plead for God's mercy and forgiveness – the mercy and forgiveness he grants not because we are in some way deserving of it, but because he is merciful and gracious. He is merciful and gracious for the sake of Jesus who gave his perfect life as the sacrifice of atonement for sin.

This is how the tax collector approaches the Lord in prayer: fully aware of his sin and ashamed of himself. He knows he has no right to be there. But he also knows that the Lord forgives sin in view of the sacrifices offered in the temple – which in turn are prophetic foreshadows of Christ's sacrifice. So, properly understood, the tax collector prays to the Lord for forgiveness trusting in the sacrifice of Jesus. And his prayer is heard by the Lord and is answered. The Pharisee doesn't think he needs forgiveness. He thinks that for himself no sacrifice is required. He approaches the Lord in prayer on his own. And his prayer is not heard or answered by the Lord – except to mark it up as another sin.

As I said, this would have been a hard idea to accept for Jesus' original audience; and even harder for the Pharisees. I mean, if the average person would have been offended by hearing Jesus say these things, imagine how the Pharisees would feel. They'd not just be offended, but angry. To be sure, it was their anger over Jesus teaching such things that caused them to rise up against him to destroy him.

But I've also said many times that there is a Pharisee in each of us. And this is why that even though we know the truth that Jesus teaches in today's Gospel, it's notoriously difficult for us to apply. And for a prime example of this, we have today's lesson from Genesis about Cain and Abel. It's a familiar story: both Cain and Abel offer sacrifices to the Lord. The Lord accepts Abel's offering and he rejects Cain's. The question is why. What makes Abel's offering acceptable? And why does the Lord reject Cain's?

Looking only at external and intuitive evidence, think we know the answer: Abel offered his best: the firstborn and fat portions. He was trying his uttermost to please the Lord. Cain, on the other hand, must have offered an inferior product. He looked over his grain, saved the best for himself, and offered the flawed and faulty leftovers to the Lord – only kernels that were shriveled and bug eaten. Or perhaps what he gave was of decent quality, but then he gave it with a bad attitude: grudgingly, resentfully, only because he felt he had to for appearance sake.

Believe me when I say that in at least 99 out of 100 sermons and Sunday school lessons on this text, that's the way it's going to be explained. And people will readily believe it. It fits their preconceived notions. They'll be told to be like Abel and keep doing their best for the Lord, and not to be like wicked Cain who gave his second rate and whose heart was stingy.

The trouble is this is the way the judgmental Pharisee in us thinks by looking only on the surface – and it's wrong. Show me in the text where it says anything about Cain's offering being less than his best. It doesn't say it. It's an assumption we leap to.

The thing to see is that the story of Cain and Abel is the Old Testament's version of the parable that Jesus tells in today's Gospel. It's the same story. But instead of "Two men went up to pray", it's "Two men went up to offer sacrifices". Cain is the Pharisee in the story. He doesn't offer his leftovers, he offers his best. He's proud of what he's giving and thinks the Lord ought to be happy to receive it. That's the problem. He imagines that he can please the Lord by the works of his sinful hands. Not possible. And this is why he's angry when his offering is rejected. If he offered something bad and was rejected, he'd have to acknowledge that it was

only fair. You do lousy work, you get a lousy grade. He's angry because he thinks his offering ought to be accepted and it isn't.

Abel, on the other hand, is the tax collector. He knows his sinfulness. He's ashamed of it and confesses it. He knows there is nothing he can offer to the Lord that will please him. Instead, he trusts in God's mercy who forgives sin through the giving of a sacrificial victim and the atonement of blood. This is why the Lord has regard for Abel's offering. Abel comes before the Lord in the righteousness of Christ.

And it's also why Cain decides to kill his brother. Just as the Pharisees conspired to kill Jesus and later persecuted and killed those who trusted in him, so Cain couldn't stand to see his sinful brother forgiven and his self righteous own person rejected.

But even here we see God's great mercy: first in calling Cain to repent and to turn from his evil plan before murdering his brother; and then afterward when, having committed the terrible crime, the Lord did not punish Cain as he deserved with death. Yes, the Lord imposed a penalty on him, driving him out and making him a wanderer; but he also placed on Cain a mark of grace that warned others to not take vengeance but to leave him in peace. And all of this was meant to produce in Cain the same sort of humble and repentant spirit that once lived in his brother. It was part of the Lord's plan to save Cain from everlasting destruction.

It's what he wants for all of us. Therefore let us learn the lesson of today's readings. Let's acknowledge the prideful spirit of Cain and the Pharisee that abides in each of us that judges things only by appearances and hopes to stand before the Lord on its own merit. And like Abel and the tax collector, two men who went up before the Lord to pray, let us daily approach the Lord recognizing and confessing our sinfulness, so that relying only on his mercy and forgiveness in Christ we may be pardoned and received. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!