

THIRTIETH SUNDAY [C]

Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18; 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18; Luke 18:9-14

Those of you from my generation undoubtedly remember the *Saturday Night Live* skit performed by Dana Carvey called “the church lady”? Carvey brilliantly played an old bitty who knew her bible but used her knowledge to pass judgment on everyone else. According to the witty SNL “church lady” parody, she alone had religion and everyone else did not.

+++++

Friends, the very essence of religion – true, real, authentic biblical religion – is not to announce one’s separation from the rest, but rather to draw people together, to establish a unity among people.

The word “religion” itself in ancient Latin means “to tie back to.” The implication of the true meaning of religion is perfectly clear: *alienation from God leads to alienation from one another.*

So, then, we need “to be tied back to” God, and in doing so, people are drawn together, a unity among people is established, people become reconnected with one other

+++++

In the Gospel parable, the Pharisee takes up his position in the Temple. Now, recall that the Pharisees were not bad-guys. In fact, in the time of Our Lord Jesus the Pharisees were respected for their strict observance of God’s Law. They did what was right...but for the wrong reasons. As we hear in the prayer of the Pharisee (to himself!), they followed the law to separate themselves from others and not “to tie back to” God and forge a greater unity among people.

Take parts of the Pharisee’s prayer: why are we to avoid greed, deception and adultery? The whole point of these laws is for us to fall more deeply in love with God and, then, with one another. That is, God’s Law is meant “to tie us back to” God and reconnect us with each other.

In Jesus’ parable, the Pharisee is bragging in his good moral behavior, almost as if he thinks he has impressed God because he has distanced himself so far from every one else.

Jesus condemns the prayer of the Pharisee not because he has done the wrong things. Rather, the Pharisee’s prayer is condemned because he has done the right things for the wrong reasons.

+++++

Rev. David W. Nuss, S.T.L.
St. Mary’s Catholic Church, Sandusky (OH)
23 October 2010

Kindly allow me to turn to athletics to help me illustrate this point. Coaches know players who know the game but for whatever reason they just have failed to catch the spirit of the game. Such players are fabulous in drills – in fact, they are the best at doing drills. But the drills do not exist for players to be the best at drills – no! Drills exist to sharpen the players skills so that they will excel in the actual game.

Friends, God’s Law is designed to bring about a similar outcome. Following God’s Law is meant to get us out of our narrow world so that we can excel in actual daily living.

Let’s take an example from God’s Law – do not be greedy. Why are we not to be greedy? Well, by not being preoccupied with our possessions and other’s possessions we have the chance “to tie back to” God and also to grow in care and compassion for others.

+++++

Join me in taking a quick look at the other character in Jesus’ parable.

The tax collector is *not* a good guy. In fact, he is an absolute scoundrel. His hands are greased by the oppressive Romans as he bilks his own people out of their meager earnings. Unlike the Pharisees who are admired for their strict observance of the Law, tax collectors are a hated figures and hated for good reason!

Notice how the tax collector prays – not with a spirit of arrogance, nor with a tone of accomplishment.

Even though the tax collector had done some very bad deeds, he – not the Pharisee - gets the essential element of religion. The tax collector – not the Pharisees - is desperately seeking to tie himself back to God.

Friends, the heart of religion – *true, real authentic religion* - is the stuff that ties us back to God and one another.