

30th Sunday Ordinary Time, C

Sometimes a thing can best be understood in terms of its opposite. As an example, the importance of light becomes most evident in the experience of total darkness.

So today, I want to emphasize the importance of a spirit of humility, what it means, and how none of us can live effectively without it. I will attempt to do that in terms of its opposite – a spirit of pride.

Throughout the Bible, no sin is more frequently or severely condemned than pride. The harshest words that Jesus ever spoke were directed at men whose lives were characterized by pride. This probably seems strange to most of us, because we don't consider pride to be that serious a matter. In fact, we often use this word in a very good and desirable sense. Parents admonish their children to take pride in their school work. A football coach urges his team to play the game with pride. When the word is used in this sense, it means self – respect, without which none of us can live life at its best. But when the Bible condemns the sin of pride, it is speaking of something altogether different – not a sense of self – worth but a spirit of self – sufficiency that recognizes no need of God or man.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus told a story which clearly illustrates the tragedy of pride and its effect on human life. It was about two men who went to the temple to pray. One boasted of his own righteousness. The other begged for God's mercy. The first man went home unaffected by his visit to the temple, while the second man went home justified. That story points out at least three things that are wrong with pride.

First, it is based on dishonesty. The Pharisee boasted that he was not grasping, crooked, or adulterous, and that he fasted twice in the week and payed tithes on all his possession. And he was probably telling the truth, as far as he went. The problem was that he did not go far enough. His pride was based on a half – truth,

which is one of the most common and deceitful forms of dishonesty. Any of us could play the same kind of game. We can look at our lives selectively; pick out a few right things that we do and few wrong things that we don't do, and end up looking pretty good. But that would not prove anything. What about the secret sins that we try to keep hidden even from ourselves? We may do a few good deeds. I suppose everyone does. The Pharisee prayed, and fasted, and tithed. Those are good things to do. But what about the good deeds that never get done? The kind word that is left unspoken? The charitable impulse that never comes to fruition? The opportunities to help that go unclaimed?

Pride is always based upon a partial picture. If we see ourselves as we truly are, we would not boast about our righteousness. Instead, we would bow our heads and pray, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner."

The next thing wrong with the pride is that it is self – defeating. It destroys the very thing that it seeks to accomplish. Jesus said, "Everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled." I remember another verse that said, "Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall." How many times have we seen that truth acted out on the stage of life? A football team gets to believe its own press clippings. They have won ten games and begin to think that maybe they are unbeatable. Then they come up against a team that hasn't won a single game all year. The proud team runs onto the field not only confident, but over – confident; and three hours later they walk away badly beaten. "Everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled."

Pride is the most self – defeating thing in the entire world. The man who thinks he knows everything is unteachable. His progress is arrested. He will never learn another thing until he faces up to his own ignorance. The artist, the writer, the musician, or the worker who is as good as he wants to be will never get any better. The person who is righteous in his own eyes will never know the redeeming grace

of God until he faces up to his own need. “Pride goes before destruction and a haughty spirit before a fall.” It is self – defeating. It reverses the process of life and makes impossible the very thing that it seeks to achieve.

Then there is one other thing. Pride is wrong because it destroys relationships. A proud and arrogant person cannot be right with anyone, including himself. The man who is constantly guarding his reputation and grooming his image is miserable in his own heart. He listens for compliments and feels slighted when they do not come. He hears every critical word, takes it to heart, and worries over it in the middle of the night. Pride makes it impossible for a person to be at peace with his own soul.

Not only that, it also makes it impossible for him to have a right relationship with anyone else. A proud man is a people – user. He seeks the company of important people who can enhance his reputation, and he has not got the time of day for anyone else. Once in a while, he may mingle with the little people, just to prove by comparison his own superiority. Pride makes meaningful human relationships a practical impossibility.

It also destroys the divine – human relationships. God will not deal with any of us on the basis of pretense. If we are going to relate to him, we have got to get real. You see, God loved that Pharisee just as much as he loved the tax collector, and was just as willing to enter his life and set things right. But he could not; because pride blocked the door.

An awareness of need is the number one condition for a real experience of divine grace. Even God cannot help the man who doesn’t know that he needs it. But Jesus said, “He who humbles himself shall be exalted.”

My Dear Brothers and Sisters, let’s be truthful with ourselves today. We are not any different from anyone else. We are good, we are bad. We are weak, we are strong. We are just people who need each other and who need God. So, deep in our

hearts, let each of us pray the tax collector's prayer, "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." Amen.