

**Homily for October 28, 2001  
32th Sunday in Ordinary Time**

**By Father Charles Bowes**

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

## *God alone is the judge.*

Many decades ago the pioneer developmental thinker, Erik Erikson, pointed out a snag in human development that hinders a person becoming fully human. He called it “pseudo-speciation”...a fancy word meaning the tendency we all have to identify with some select group rather than with the whole human community.

This tendency to identify selectively shows itself in our thinking and talking in terms of “us” vs. “them” – in which the “us” is typically superior to the “them.” The bigger human community loses out as we neglect the whole for the sake of our advancement and exaltation – I think it comes from fear – fear of the unknown.

Our gospel today, Luke eighteen, gives us a concrete illustration of this tendency at work. A devout and respectable man, a member of the disciplined and highly committed Pharisees, needs to set himself apart from others as he prays. Despite all his virtuous qualities he does not want to join himself with someone he perceives to belong to a lower order – this tax collector. Indeed, the tax collector himself keeps apart and acknowledges his sinfulness. But Jesus uses

the parable to point out the fundamental oneness...the fundamental unity of humanity before God. Whatever our virtues, we are sinners before the all-good God and we are in need of God’s mercy. The tendency to exalt ourselves – often at the expense of others – continues to haunt us.

Perhaps the parable can jolt us if we hear it and realize that we belong to both categories of people shown here – the devout rightly glad of their goodness and the sinners paralyzed by their condition. The parable is a call to humility – a call to see the truth of how far we still have to go in the Christian life and to celebrate how far we’ve already come. We’re all sinners in need of reform and God’s mercy and at the same time we are virtuous people rejoicing in good works. Salvation is to recognize the source of who and what we are. Maybe the real shock is that the parable is really not about us but about God as the ultimate judge and source of mercy. How ready are we for this “revelation”? I think the answer is found in our willingness to rethink some of those categories in which we put ourselves and others.

This weekend we are welcoming a number of folks into our Catechumenate and a large dimension of that welcome is the use of the cross – the sign of the cross – it is carried in procession; it is held by those embracing the pursuit of faith and it is signified,

marked on the bodies of those welcomed and all this is done by us who share the same sign – the same sign of humility and dependence upon an all knowing and all loving God.

If we can gaze upon the Crucified and see in that figure not a Jesus of long ago but our own best self put there in no small measure by our continuing need to judge – if we can but surrender to that great symbol and fall into the hands of the God of Jesus Christ – we too can be set free and it is that freedom for which we yearn and that life which we wish to share with our new brothers and sisters.

A recent book in the self-help world has the catchy title: *Every Saint Has A Past, Every Sinner Has A Future*. The premise is that knowing who you are with both strengths and weaknesses, will bring you happiness and prosperity. Certainly such awareness will help us create a more rounded and healthy lifestyle. But the challenge is always to focus on changing oneself and not worrying as much about what other people are doing or not doing.

The Pharisee doesn't seem aware of his past, however, and the tax collector is not yet aware of his future. But one is at least on the right track. What the tax collector isn't doing is standing in the back of the temple wishing he were more like the Pharisee.

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