



THIRTIETH SUNDAY OF ORDINARY TIME

CYCLE C

Sirach 35: 12-14, 16-18

2 Timothy 4: 6-8, 16-18

Luke 18: 9-14

GATHERING

(An unlit candle and a bible rest on a table covered with cloth. As members arrive they place on the table the personal or family prayer books they have brought with them.)

Last week we looked at the importance of persevering in prayer with uplifted hands and open hearts. This week we ponder further the proper disposition and attitude for prayer. We all pray with an attitude. What is yours? What was your prayer like this past week? *(Members share briefly.)*

OPENING PRAYER

(The candle is lit. A selection of instrumental music is played. As the music begins, the facilitator asks members to put a hand on their wallet or purse. Members are invited to imagine forgetting it at home and having to go through the day without it. Several members read the reflections that follow.)

Blessed Are The Poor In Spirit

I: And then I turned to the empty ones: What does it mean to be poor in spirit? I asked. Is there anything good about being that poor?

And the poor in spirit replied: Can God fill anyone who is full? And how sad if you should suddenly discover that you're full of illusions instead of full of truth.

- II: Being poor in spirit means being empty and knowing it which means being full of possibility to be more.
- III: It means knowing that you're so small and dependent and unconverted and needy that you live with open hands and open heart waiting to be healed.

For only then can you be healed if you know that you need healing.

- IV: And being poor in spirit means that nothing ever has to happen immediately. There is always time for waiting for the spiritually poor.

For being poor in this way frees you from the prison of having to have everything planned and structured and ready as though there were no tomorrow.

- V: And finally, being poor in spirit means being able to say to everyone you meet unashamed and unafraid humbly, and yet with passion: I need you!

Macrina Wiederkehr, O.S.B. *Seasons of Your Heart*.
Silver Burdett Publishers, 1979.

(The community pauses for some time in silence.)

FOCUS QUESTION

What circumstances, places or things help you to pray?

SCRIPTURE SHARING AND REFLECTION

(The scriptures are read aloud with a pause after each reading. Following a pause after the gospel, the facilitator invites members to mention a word, a phrase or an image from one of the readings that particularly struck them this week. Members then go on to read over the commentary and consider the questions in silence for several minutes before entering into conversation.)

COMMENTARY

Do you sit in the same pew week after week? Pew seating has a hierarchy in case you haven't noticed. Have you ever unknowingly sat in someone else's customary pew or in the choir's pews in the front? How about the back pews? Some people stake out their places there too. Back pews in churches often are a refuge for late comers, early leavers, mothers with children or those who might not want to be immersed in all that church *community stuff*.

Well, what about the tax collector whom we meet today? He too sat in the back pew – because he had an attitude. Yes, an attitude! Of course, the Pharisee relished the front pew and sat there because he too had an attitude. Imagine that – having an attitude in church! Interestingly enough, for one the attitude helped him to pray and undergo conversion. The other had an attitude that kept him in a shallow world of self absorption and conceit. Such a disposition forms a hardened shell that can not easily be broken. Is it any surprise then that our Pharisee went away empty in the eyes of God. He received nothing because he needed nothing – at least in his own eyes. What an attitude!

“The Lord hears the cry of the poor,” says the psalmist. This disposition is echoed in Sirach: “The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds and will not rest till it reaches its goal.” The tax collector found his God and justification because he prayed with a poverty of spirit. He prayed with open hands that held nothing except his own neediness and humility. Now that is an attitude.

In his classic book, **With Open Hands**, Henri J. Nouwen describes prayer that bears fruit as praying with open hands. Open hands do not hold onto anything. They are able to touch, to feel and above all to receive. In prayer, the tax collector acknowledged his sins and neediness. With open heart and hands, he received what he needed. However, the Pharisee, with clenched fist, arrived at a dead end because he lacked humility and the awareness of his need to change. He was not open to the possibility that with God's help he could become a better person. As long as he persisted in that attitude, God could only leave him to wallow in his own virtue, his own self-appointed sainthood. Perhaps he was afraid to be *poor*, afraid to let go of his preconceived ideas, afraid to allow God to lead him to new ways, afraid to trust and afraid to lose control of his life. But such a life is as fragile as a house of cards. Little did he realize how *rich* in prayer was that tax collector who prayed with an enviable poverty of spirit, a poverty that created a space where God could enter.

What does this all mean for us? In short, we must each make that space for God and learn to let go of whatever fears, attachments, and attitudes that hamper our life of prayer. As Nouwen said so simply:

Above all, therefore, prayer is a way of life which allows you to find a stillness in the midst of the world where you open your hands to God's promises, and find hope for yourself, your fellowman and the whole community in which you live. In prayer, you encounter God in the soft breeze, in the distress and joy of your neighbor and in the loneliness of your own heart.¹

Remember: It is not the pew that's important. It's the attitude that sits in it that counts.

FAITH SHARING AND INTEGRATION

- ◆ How does the word, phrase or image that struck you from this week's scriptures speak to your life or the life of the community, your family or your world these days?
- ◆ If you pray at times with *closed hands*, what are you holding onto?
- ◆ When has your prayer been answered in ways you never imagined?
- ◆ Where do you sit in church and why?
- ◆ Relate a particularly moving experience that happened in liturgy.
- ◆ Tell a story about the family prayer book you brought with you or one you remember.

RESPONSE IN ACTION

(The leader poses the question, "What does God ask of you/us in light of our sharing of life and faith this week?" After a few minutes of reflection, the leader invites conversation in response to the question.)

- ◆ Attend Mass in a parish that is ethnically, culturally, or economically different from your own. Be open to the spirit and attitudes moving people to pray. Pray for yourself and your family. Pray for the community you join.

¹ Henri J.M. Nouwen. **With Open Hands.** Notre Dame, Ave Maria Press, 1972.

- ◆ Change pews the next several times you go to church. Notice the difference.
- ◆ Treat yourself to a half-day of reflection at a retreat house or a state park.

SENDING FORTH AND CLOSING PRAYER

(The song “There is a Longing” is played. It may be found on Utube. Following the song, the community pauses in silence. After a time of quiet the leader invites prayers of praise, thanksgiving and petition. To each prayer, members respond, “We need you, Lord.” The session concludes with members praying in two alternate groups.)

I: “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
my spirit rejoices in God my savior.

II: For he has looked upon his handmaid’s lowliness;
behold, from now on will all ages call me blessed.

I: The Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

II: His mercy is from age to age
to those who fear him.

I: He has shown might with his arm,
dispersed the arrogant of mind and heart.

II: He has thrown down the rulers from their thrones
but lifted up the lowly.

I: The hungry he has filled with good things;
the rich he has sent away empty.

II: He has helped Israel his servant,
remembering his mercy,
according to his promise to our fathers,
to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

All: Glory be to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. Amen.