

Commentary on the Gospel for Sat, Mar 29th 2014

Before Lent began this year, my wife and I discussed possible Lenten sacrifices. I rattled off the usual dietary suspects of sweets, coffee and alcohol. She reminded me that our children's school was asking kids to give up vices like whining and to cultivate virtues like gratitude. She then requested that I give up complaining for Lent. I immediately complained about this potential distraction from my real Lenten sacrifice!

Like this anecdote, there is an undeniable humor to today's gospel reading. One can imagine Jesus adding dramatic effect as he parodies the Pharisee's self-righteousness. "O GOD, I thank you that I am NOT like the REST OF HUMANITY – SO Greedy...SO Dishonest...SO...(pause)...Adulterous." Humorous undertones to the side, Luke is reiterating one of the central themes of the Jewish and Christian scriptures: we are sinners who depend on God's mercy. When asked in his America Magazine interview last year to introduce "Jorge Mario Bergoglio," Pope Francis answered simply, "I am a sinner."

This is a crucial message for us to consider during the Lenten season. It is so easy to get caught up in our own personal sacrifices – to treat Lent like a delayed opportunity to complete our New Year's resolutions. "No more chocolate, no more beer, no more Facebook..." But in one of the most famous lines from the Book of Hosea, the prophet reminds us that God's call has more to do with how we live than what we give up. "It is love I desire, not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than holocausts."

In our secularizing American context, it can be easy for the Christian to react against the culture by seeking religiosity for its own sake. But religion doesn't save us – God does. Over and over, the prophets and the gospels remind us that the true human problem is not so much "no religion" as "false religion." When my religious devotion becomes more about me than God, I am modeling false religion. When my religious devotion separates me from the needs of my brothers and sisters in the world, I have fallen into false religion. When my religious devotion puffs me up, I am far from the Kingdom of God.

The famous "Jesus prayer" from the Eastern Orthodox tradition echoes the tax collector in Luke 18:13. "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me, a poor sinner." May these words be on our lips as we enter into the final weeks of our Lenten journey.

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