

30th Sunday 2016

Who do you think you are? Anyone ever asked you that question? There is usually a tone of voice that comes with the question. You could say It's a loaded question. It's loaded with judgment! You know the person who asks doesn't really think too much of you. Another variation would be, "Who does she think she is?" Hrrumph. Another loaded question! Loaded with judgment and disdain.

Who do you think you are? Who does he think he is? These are the questions that can arise from today's scriptures.

Who does the Pharisee think he is? Well he thinks he's a good man, a religious man who does what the law commands and more. He's pretty pleased with himself.

But when the Pharisee compares himself with the publican, you can almost here him say "Who does he think he is? He doesn't belong in the temple. He's a sinner, the enemy of the people, a collaborator with the Romans. He is to be despised. Outcast. " He has some nerve coming here!

And the publican? Who does he think he is? According to the gospel he thinks of himself as a "sinner", in need of God's mercy. It must have taken a great deal of "nerve", to come into the temple to pray, to beat his breast and say "Have mercy on me O God". Like another passage in Luke's Gospel where a woman who is a known sinner comes into the house of a Pharisee, a place where she does not belong, so here the publican comes into the temple, the place reserved for the holy and righteous, begging for God's mercy.

Who does he think he is? That's the question that Luke the Evangelist begins with. And frankly it's a loaded question in this parable. Today's parable is very black and white. Publican good guy/ Pharisee bad guy. Ironically, the evangelist does something similar to what he is criticizing the Pharisee for. He tells us at the beginning that Jesus told this parable to demonstrate self-righteousness and disdain for the other. Well, Luke does the same. We already are prejudiced against the Pharisee, because he is a Pharisee and more often than not Pharisees are the bad guys in the Gospels. It doesn't matter what an "upstanding" member of society the Pharisee was. And he was. Yes, he's proud as a peacock and strutting his stuff but he's still a "good man" But something is missing?

What's missing? Who does each think God is? For the Pharisee, God is an accountant who keeps track of his investments. The relationship with God is more transactional, Quid pro quo. In fact the Pharisee "prays to himself" For the publican, God is a healer, a font of mercy, a source of love and forgiveness. For the Pharisee God is all about Me, Me, Me For the Publican you can hear him whisper You.

This parable has become very real for me since I came to Xavier. One of the very good things that happens here is that during the week the church doors are kept wide open and many people come to pray. I don't know what's in their mind or heart but I imagine if they are coming to pray in the middle of the day, they are like the publican, asking for God's help, God's guidance, God's mercy. It is very moving to see this.

So who do you think you are? Or better, Who do you think you are? Pharisee or Publican? That, my friends, is a loaded question! It's loaded with possibility for each of us to pray from our hearts and to whisper "You".