Homily, 24 October 2010
Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Sirach 35:12-14,16-18; Psalm 34:2-3,17-18,19,23; 2 Timothy 4:6-8,16-18; Luke 18:9-14

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But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'

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In my family I think I am looked upon as “the holy man.” Family members, even very extended family members will ask me to pray for them – or to pray for someone they are worried about.

That didn’t happen before I was ordained.

Other people, friends and acquaintances, ask me to pray as well. That’s okay. I am quite happy to add people to my prayer list.

But once in awhile a prayer request will make me sad. I don’t mean the request itself (a lot of those are quite sad), but the way that the person asked me.

Sometimes I think people ask me to pray because they can’t pray themselves – or because they think God won’t listen to them – as if they’ve gotten so far from God that they have been forgotten.

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But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'

The tax collector knew how he stood before God, and it wasn’t good. But he also seems to have been well grounded in his faith:

• “O Lord, you have probed me, you know me,” begins Psalm 139, “you know when I sit and stand; you understand my thoughts from afar.”
• “... in my inmost being teach me wisdom,” reads another psalm.¹

Long before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, the Jews understood that God may speak to us in a very private and interior way.

Now, after Pentecost, God’s relationship with us is even deeper and more abiding:

“Do you not know,” wrote Paul to the Corinthians, “that your body is a temple of the holy Spirit within you, which you have from God?”²

...and he also said: “in the same way, the Spirit too comes to the aid of our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit itself intercedes with inexpressible groanings.”³

But the tax collector stood off at a distance and would not even raise his eyes to heaven but beat his breast and prayed, 'O God, be merciful to me a sinner.'

The tax collector prayed with humility: he knew who he was before God. His prayer was simple: eight words that told the truth.

His prayer needed solitude: he stood off at distance.

He had faith that God would hear him: The LORD is a God of justice, who knows no favorites. ...The prayer of the lowly pierces the clouds; it does not rest till it reaches its goal, nor will it withdraw till the Most High responds.

¹ Psalm 51
² 1 Corinthians 6
³ Romans 8
Personal prayer is, by its nature, simple and contemplative. It requires but two things: faith that Holy Spirit abides within your heart, and solitude for listening attentively to his still, quiet voice.

You know, the most amazing thing about the tax collector is that he knew he needed solitude; not isolation, just ... solitude.

In that busy place around the Temple, he found a moment of interior quiet and focus in which to bring himself into the presence of God.

He went off a little way, certainly not far. He didn’t go on pilgrimage, or take a class in meditation, he just brought himself into the presence of God.

He used the holiness of the Temple. We can use the holiness of this place, or sacred scripture, or our treasury of prayers, or simply the stillness of night by walking under the stars or sitting on the porch.

Now let me tell you a secret: sometimes even the family ‘holy man’ needs to heed his own advice ... and simply follow the example of the tax collector.

Let’s have faith that God always hears us ... each and every one .... and let’s pray for one another.