

As many of you know, especially if you donated cookies a couple of weeks ago, I was in the prison last weekend for the semi-annual Kairos retreat. We reached over a hundred men across the prison during the 4 days, and every single one of them was deeply affected. One guy came to me on Sunday morning and told me it was the first morning in over five years that he felt free from the weight of the guilt and regret that he had been carrying. He's in for at least 10 more years, but he is now seeing this time ahead as an opportunity rather than a prison sentence. Just as it is true for all of us, life begins only when we have a purpose, and cooperating with God is the highest purpose you can ascribe to. As always, your homemade cookies were a big hit – several inmates asked me to convey their thanks to you.

This wonderful parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector is a feature of the Kairos weekend, usually proclaimed during one of the forgiveness talks. Many of these guys have been hammered by biblical passages that convey judgement and punishment, but this one is certainly different! The hero is someone just like they are, someone who has not followed the law, has not been a good church-goer, is not well acquainted with ethics and morality. Jesus surprising message? Even if you do it all wrong, even if your life is an example of missing the mark countless times, even if you are shunned like a convict, you can still be justified! That's a powerful, too-good-to-be true message. It's all about *humility*. Do we dare pray to be humbled? To be humiliated?

I was driving home one evening not long ago, and the sun was very low in the sky. It was a beautiful day, and I was thoroughly enjoying how the light played on the trees as the sun set. Then I turned my car to the west for a moment and the full light of the sun shone directly at me. As I reached for the visor to shade my eyes, you would think that praise for God would come to my lips as I saw his reflected glory. Nope. My thought was much simpler and direct – “Wow, my windshield is really dirty!” It didn't just become dirty, of course – it had been quite dirty for some time. It took direct, unflinching light to illuminate the reality, a reality I hadn't even noticed.

If you read the lives of the saints, you will find a certain theme running through their lives. The more saintly they became, the more horrified they would be at the sin that permeated their lives. Their “dirty windshields” became intolerable. St. Paul expresses this beautifully in his letter to the Romans: “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want,

but I do the very thing I hate.” Some saints became overly scrupulous to the point where they beat themselves or deprived themselves of food and sleep, all for the glory of God. The Church used to celebrate these feats of deprivation, but luckily, cooler heads have prevailed, and the Church no longer demands nor expects such actions from anyone. As one priest joked, “Yeah, they took all the fun out of assigning penances!”

Jesus’ wonderful parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector highlights in striking contrast the difference between pride and humility. The Pharisee not only believes that Israel is the chosen race, but he believes that he is the perfect icon of “chosenness” itself. In fact, the only way that he can describe himself is in contrast to the rest of humanity. This is a key feature of pride. It is always a judgement, always a stance from above, always a celebration of the ego. As C.S. Lewis says, “It’s hard to look up when you’re always looking down!” The tax collector, on the other hand, is achingly honest with himself and with God. He knows precisely what he is, and more importantly, makes only one judgement, a judgement that clearly makes God smile in approval, because it is the truth. The tax collector knows he is a sinner, and yet asks for mercy just the same.

Why does God value humility so much? I think it is because humility allows us to be taught. Pride tells us that we know it all already. I recall a time long ago when I was skiing with a friend. We came to the top of a very high, steep slope and he shook his head and said, “I can’t ski that one!” I, being an expert skier, said, “Sure, you can! Just follow me...” “Well, OK,” he said. I started off down the slope, and promptly crossed my skis at the exact wrong moment, losing my balance, falling headfirst down the slope. I turned into a human snowball and found myself at the bottom of the hill, spitting out snow, my gear strewn everywhere. Luckily, I was unhurt. My friend yelled down, “Should I do that too?!” Everyone’s a comedian.

In some cultures, especially in the Middle East, being humiliated is literally a fate worse than death. No one enjoys being embarrassed or exposed, even if it is deserved. But humiliation and humility are awfully close to each other in the dictionary. One of my favorite authors, Fr. Richard Rohr, has the audacity to pray that he be humiliated at least once/day! This is the way that he, a world-famous speaker, stays grounded and yes, humble. I’m not sure I want to adopt that prayer in my life, but consider the value in your life of a routine reminder that you are not God.

Here are some other wonderful quotes about humility that I share with you:

Humility is not thinking less of yourself, it is thinking of yourself less. –  
C.S. Lewis

Pride makes us artificial and humility makes us real. Thomas Merton

Humility is the only thing that a devil cannot imitate. St. John Climacus

I like this final one the best – for what brought Satan to hell was his prideful refusal to serve God. A devil cannot fake humility, for it is the very antithesis of his being. Perhaps this simple test will be our entry exam into heaven. Whom do *you* serve?