

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

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Contrary to what some people may presume, priests and pastors are some of the most competitive people I know, when it comes to how they perform their ministries. You'd think it might be otherwise—that a good pastor would be more than content to know that he's doing good and important work among the people of a parish or school. And sometimes that's true. But not nearly always, or maybe not even very often. Or maybe I'm being a little too self-disclosive here. Far too often it is not good enough merely to be doing good work; it also has to be better work than Fr. "X" at St. Paul's parish across town. But why should that be necessary? And how would I or anybody know if it's even true?

At our monthly priests' deanery luncheon this past week the young newly-ordained associate pastor at St. Odilia's was kind enough to mention to me that he had recently heard a St. Pascal's parishioner gushing about what a great pastor I am, but he cannot remember that person's name. I said with a straight face, "Well, Father James, that could have been just about anybody."

But I was also aware of a little stab of pride in hearing that compliment, pride in imagining that I'm something special among my peers. I'm not, and the sooner I come to terms with that, the healthier and more honest I and all of us will be. I am aware that I am at least minimally competent in the things I do as a pastor, but why in the world would that require that I compare myself to any other priest that I know?

The only answer to that rhetorical question is: Sin, and the effects of sin. And I think this goes to the heart of today's parable of Jesus in the gospel of Luke. In one sense, both the Pharisee and the tax collector are caricatures—one is seemingly perfectly righteous and knows it, and the other is seemingly vile, and also knows it. Neither kind of person actually exists in real life, at least not when they are mentally healthy.

But where these two men differ greatly in their prayers to God is this: one of them can't seem to speak about himself without comparing himself to everyone else around him. The other one is content to deal with his own soul, as honestly as he can. It is true that we Christians are on this journey and in this church *together*, for the sake of the mission, but we are *not* here together in order to sort ourselves out into good, better and best in living out the gospel. And even at the most practical level, think of how much energy and worry we expend all the time in wondering whether we are being as successful in our life tasks as everybody else is...whether it's in our baking and cooking, in our parenting and spousing, in our reading or speaking, or—yes—in our praying and religious observance. What a complete waste of time and trouble, as if the mercy and goodness of God is finite and can't be spread generously all over the place. (Or as if we could control it!) The Pharisee in today's gospel felt good about himself because he believed that he was better than the guy over there. Well, what happens when there's a different, more impressive, more pious guy over there someday? It's a setup for failure. The tax collector in this parable didn't have any "guy over there" in his prayer. Only himself.

It is important how we arrange our relationship with God, day-by-day. How we pray, how we work, how we engage community with our time, our talent, and our treasure, and whom we choose to notice as the recipients of our care and attention.

But one thing that is not at all important is how we compare to everybody else, or to anybody else. That would be true even if we could see into the hearts of anybody else—but let's be honest enough to admit that we can't. May Jesus' teaching today be an opportunity for us to rid ourselves of comparisons that serve only to feed our false sense pride—or of defeat. God is willing to work with each of us on one-to-one terms, if we will open our prayerful hearts to that. We are together here, but we are not in competition here.