

Clueless

'For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.' Lk 18:14

So the other day when I was bringing the bulletins to church and setting up for Sunday, this teenager rides up on his skateboard and comes into church. [Loud] 'Yeah I want an espresso double shot on ice with two raw sugars.' Are you kidding' I say, 'bro, this isn't Starbucks, this is St. Hagop Armenian Church.' He looks around [whisper] "Sorry... I want an espresso double shot on ice with two raw sugars.' [] Sure let's have a good laugh at this clueless teenager. But get ready, because you know that when I tell a joke in church, the joke is always on us. The joke is on us, because today's Gospel reading reminds us that, not unlike this teen, we are pretty clueless when it comes to praying to God; we don't know who God really is and what to ask for. Yet if we own up to our shortcomings and are persistent in trying, God promises that he will do the rest.

So sure, none of us have ever come to church and ordered an Espresso, but aren't we all almost that clueless in our requests and expectations of God? We all start off in our faith, and many remain so, as sort of consumers of the goods and services of 'god.' God I will come before you a few times a year if you continue to keep my life comfortable and free of major disasters. When I do need you, I will drop by and make my requests. It's not quite ordering an Espresso from a drive thru, but it is very transactional. It is how we are trained as modern consumers, and it's not surprising that it leaks into church life. I'll give you this God and you give me that. Even for those of us who are committed to God and his church, we don't escape this sin. Sure we give more to the church, and service of God, but often we expect more in return. Recognition. Honor. Influence. Control. Inside access to God.

Well the amazing thing, and the first lesson we find in today's parable of the Judge and the 40 days of Lent is that, despite our mixed motives, God works with us. As misguided as we are, he encourages us to come before Him in any and every way in worship and prayer. That's the example he puts before us today of the old woman who comes before the judge every day to complain of the injustice done to her, pleading for him to resolve her case. Rather than calling her a pest or saying she is just working in her own interest, Jesus holds this woman up as an example of persistence in prayer. Apparently, God wants us to come before him always, even with our immature and misguided requests. God can work with that, and in time our transactional relationship with Him becomes transformational. Instead of seeking God for what he does, we start to seek him merely for who He is.

In short, God will meet us wherever we are, and with our persistence, take us somewhere unimaginably better. It doesn't matter to God how we first come to him-clueless, foolish or full of sin-it only matters where we are going. There is only one way, however, that God cannot take us, and that way is illustrated in the second parable of today's reading. A Pharisee and a tax collector come into church and pray. The Pharisee is to all appearances a holy man and respected in society. He prays confidentially 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, (not an) extortioner, unjust, (an) adulterer, or like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get.' The tax collector, on the other hand, was despised by his society and had a very different prayer. He stands in a corner by himself, does not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beats his breast, saying, "God, be merciful to me a sinner!"

Contrary to the values of his times, Jesus says that this sinful tax collector's way with God was much more hopeful than the Pharisee's. That's because the Pharisee was so full of himself, that he had no room for God. He was so judgmental to others, that he was judged before God. His character is exaggerated, but not so much that we can't see our own self-righteousness in him. 'Thank God I am successful; that because I work hard unlike those who struggle.' 'Thank God for our traditional family values, we're not like those broken families with troubled kids.' 'Thank God that we are Armenian, the first Christians, unlike those people with no history or heritage.' We do have blessings and things to be proud of, but so did the Pharisee. The danger is when we are filled with self, there is no room for others - including God! The tax collector on the other hand knows who he is in the eyes of God. He feels unworthy and dares not even look up. Unable to offer anything of his own righteousness in prayer, he can only throw himself on the mercy of God and thus finds the shortest distance between hopelessness and salvation -- the grace of God.

We too are to come before God so humbled, and the 40 days of Lent and today's Gospel reading give us much practice in humility. Such that now perhaps we can laugh less at the clueless teenager who came to church, and instead laugh more with him, for we are all pretty clueless when it comes to entering into the presence of God. We order stuff from God and try to use him for our own ends insteads of his own. We value ourselves much more highly than we should. Yet our God of great mercy does not abandon us. He starts off where we are, but never gives up on raising us up to what we are called to be, now and always; amen.