

Confronting Arrogance

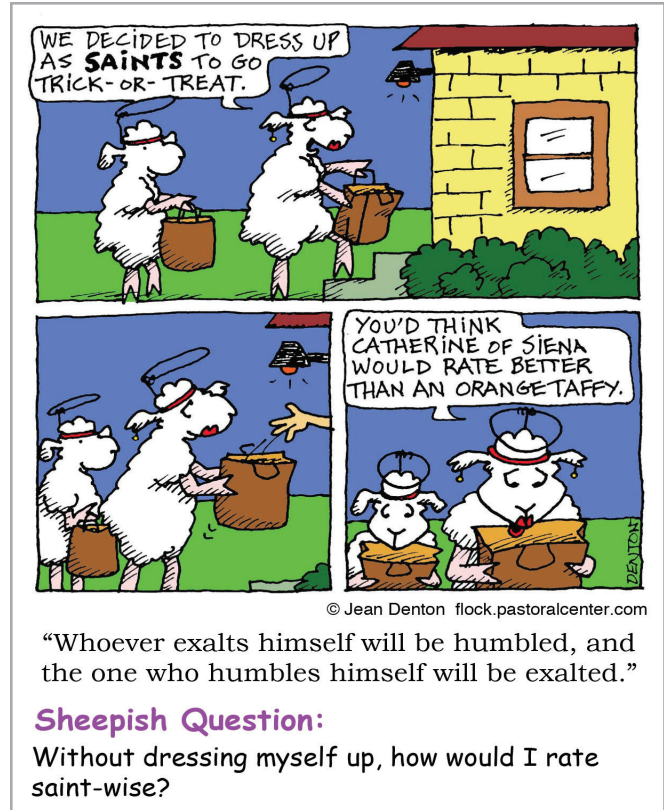
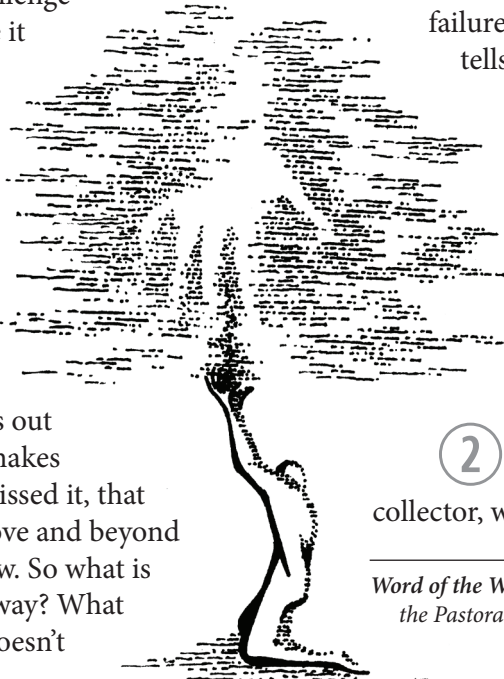
This Week's Readings at Mass

- ▶ Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18 - The God of justice
- ▶ 2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18 - Reward for fidelity
- ▶ Luke 18:9-14 - The pharisee and the tax collector

After the Gospel passage last week in which Jesus reminded his disciples that God hears the cries of those who call out to him “day and night” (like the widow in the parable), the first reading today makes the same point. God hears the cry of the weak, the oppressed, and the vulnerable. However, Sirach insists God shows “no favorites” and is a God of justice. Jesus will drive that point home in the Gospel reading, once again reminding his hearers that human ways are not always God’s ways.

Immediately we know who Jesus’ audience is in this Gospel reading: “those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else,” usually identified as the scribes and Pharisees. As in other places in the Gospels, Jesus is not shy about confronting arrogance and judgmentalism when he sees it. He consistently speaks to people what they need to hear, building them up when they have been beaten down by life, and taking people down a peg when they need that. Last week, his words offered encouragement for his followers to persist when life is difficult. This week it is a challenge to those who think they have it all together and don’t need God’s mercy because they do everything right.

Ironically, the “prayer” of the Pharisee in this parable isn’t really even directed at God. He is speaking to himself and telling God how well he compares to the sinful tax collector he notices out of the corner of his eye. He makes sure to boast, lest God has missed it, that his fasting and tithing go above and beyond what is required by Jewish law. So what is the point of his “prayer” anyway? What does he want from God? It doesn’t



seem he has any need *for* God or anything *from* God. He is so full of himself and his own accomplishments; there is no room left in him for God. He goes home without receiving any gifts from God—because he doesn’t think he needs any.

The tax collector, on the other hand, knows his life is a mess and knows he needs God’s mercy. His prayer is addressed straight to God, without comparing himself to the Pharisee nearby. He focuses on his own failures and asks for what he needs: mercy. Jesus tells us that he goes home having received the gift.

Questions of the Week

- 1 Which kind of message do you most need to hear from Jesus at this point in your life, encouragement or challenge? Or is there something else you need to hear more?
- 2 If you were to go to God in prayer today as honestly and humbly as the tax collector, what would you ask for?