

LOOKING TO SUNDAY®

Sunday, October 27, 2019

The Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

This email, entitled Looking to Sunday®, focuses on one or more of the scripture readings for the coming Sunday. It prepares readers to hear God's Word at Mass and it offers a point of reflection to consider in the days leading to Sunday. Looking to Sunday is written by Father Tom Iwanowski.

Looking to Sunday has been published for more than ten years.

FRONT OR BACK?

When people go to hear their favorite music group in concert, they do their best to get a seat close to the stage.

When fans go to see the football team that they enthusiastically support play at home, they try to get tickets that will put them near the field, and ideally, close to the bench.

When voters go to listen to their candidate give a speech, they try to work their way through the crowd so they can be near the speaker's podium. They want to be as close as possible to their candidate and perhaps even be able to shake his or her hand.

People want the best seats, and those seats are up front, close to the action.

Yet it seems the opposite is true when people come to church. Very often the pews in the back are filled first, and the ones in the front have empty places, and sometimes are not filled at all.

This Sunday's Gospel (Luke 18:9-14) might lead us to think that is how it should be. There Jesus tells a parable about two people who go to the temple to pray.

The first person, a Pharisee, takes a place up in front and there he thanks God that he is not like the sinners around him. He is not greedy, dishonest, or adulterous. He fasts and pays tithes on his whole income. He boasts of his righteousness.

The other person in the parable, the tax collector, takes a place in the back of the temple. With downcast eyes, he beats his breast and prays, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner."

Jesus then says that the tax collector, standing in the back, went home justified before God, while the Pharisee who took his place in front, did not.

It would seem then that the further back we are in church, the greater the chance we will be set right with God. Apparently, the back pews are better than the front pews. At least that seems to be what some people think.

However, in the parable it is not the physical location that the Pharisee and the tax collector have in the temple that is the issue but rather the place they think they have before God.

The Pharisee, in his own estimation, was doing so well that God had to be pleased with him. He certainly was doing better than the people to whom he compared himself. He felt he deserved a "front pew" before God.

The tax collector knew he was far from the Lord. He was a sinner, a cheater, an exploiter of his own people. He knew he needed God's mercy and forgiveness, and God's grace if he were to change.

Sunday's parable calls us to take an honest look at ourselves. It calls us to realize that all of us are in the position of the tax collector, for all of us are sinners.

Where we sit in church is not what is most important but where we think we stand in the eyes of God. If we think we are just doing fine, we need to think again. As Saint John tells us, "If we say 'We are without sin,' we deceive ourselves ... If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins and cleanse us from every wrongdoing." (1 John 1:8-9)

Perhaps, we sinners should actually sit up front, for as we are told in the Letter to the Hebrews, "So let us confidently approach the throne of grace to receive mercy and to find grace for timely help." (Hebrews 4:16) The more we need God, the more we need to get up front!

2019 Rev. Thomas B. Iwanowski