

## 2-17-19 - Sunday of the Pharisee and Publican © T. Hardenbrook



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Amen.

Yesterday, I had the pleasure of meeting a young man from Greece who was from the Peloponnese islands. These are the islands nestled between Greece and Italy, and when I heard the word Peloponnese, I had not thought about for many years, but as a literature major, it struck me and this old neuron in my brain fired. And I remembered my love for Homer's works, particularly Homer's *Odyssey*, which is the epic poem, *The Adventure Of Odysseus, Coming Back Home After The Trojan War*. We all remember the story of the Trojan Horse, the horse that just presented at Troy and deceives the Trojans, and the city is taken. And Odysseus has to travel all the way back from Troy to home, but the gods are angry with him. So everything goes wrong the whole way. Maybe you've seen some movies about Odysseus.

And I started thinking about those great men of renown from the ancient times, especially of that era along with Odysseus, Achilles, Agamemnon, Perseus, Hector, these incredible heroes that were so amazing and they most likely did exist. Although many legends grew up around them, the best legends are based on reality. And these were men that were so incredible in battle, so unbelievably skilled, that the people came to believe that they were either at least favored by the gods, if not maybe semi-deities themselves. Maybe one of the gods had come and appeared as a man and fathered them, and actually they were half god-like because they defied death.

They lived in a world where death reigned either in sickness or in battle. They had to learn to embrace it, to not be afraid of it, and yet these men although they put themselves in incredible danger all of the time, they were not afraid of death. They gloried in the idea of dying honorably. And this spirit of the warrior who is not afraid of death, finds its way clearly in the Orthodox church among the fathers, Saint Basil the Great, being the one who most openly says, "It is better to die honorably than to live dishonorably." That's a conviction of one of the greatest saints in our church.

And I started thinking about these great heroes, and you're familiar whether you know it or not, with what the heroes had, many of them, which was called, the fatal flaw. The fatal flaw, so the one you're familiar with, where do you know it or not, is the Achilles' heel, we still use that phrase. "Oh my Achilles' heel is this, this person's Achilles' heel is this." What is the Achilles' heel?

Achilles was immersed as a child, baptized we would say in their tradition, immersed in holy water up, but they had to hang onto his heel, remember? When they dipped him in. And so his entire being was protected by the gods invincible, except for that little spot on his heel. And in battle one day, I believe it's in the Trojan war, he's running, this glorious warrior ... And I can't remember if it's a spear or an arrow, but he's struck, stabbed in that heel in that place where he's not protected. And he gets sick from the wound and he dies eventually, this great hero. That is Achilles' heel.

And that word for the fatal flaw that they all have, these heroes would have this fatal flaw, and it doesn't mean necessarily they were going to die, it's that they are fated, it's a fated flaw. There is something wrong. And even though they are heading in a certain direction with all of

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their intent, all of their focus, something is going to fatefully get them off course, and something's going to go wrong.

That arrow that comes and strikes him in the heel, a wound that should be easy to overcome, and yet it's his fatal flaw. And that word in Greek for the fatal flaw, the thing that is going to throw you off is, Hamartia, not that you're supposed to know that. And what it literally means in ancient Greek is, missing the mark. You miss the mark. You're out on the archery field, you're aiming for that bullseye. You've done what you can to prepare, but when you shoot the arrow, this unexpected wind comes, and you miss the mark. Your intent was right, but something else influences you and you miss what you're aiming at.

And in the early church, when the great saints of the Church started formulating the theology of our church and having to choose, this is a very open historic fact that we can study very easily, they had to choose a vocabulary to express their experience of the teachings of Christ, the teachings of the apostles, and their own theological experience, the mystical experience of knowing God, knowing who he really is, and then trying to find words that fit the way he works and the things he does.

And when they look at this word we are going to, in English, get as Sin. When they wanted to describe what it meant to sin, they picked the word Hamartia, missing the mark. And that should go in deep. You should think about that for a minute, because in our Western formation, sin in Latin comes from a word more associated with being wounded. And in Spanish, it's like bitten, being bitten. Something has happened to you and you have to fix it. And in the Western tradition comes from that theology, that idea all these things about something is wrong with me and I need to do something about it, that is true in a lot of ways, but in the Western tradition, God is displeased with me like the ancient gods, the Pagan gods, the unreal gods, and I have to do something to fix the situation.

And that is not the theology of the Orthodox Church when it comes to hamartia, sin. We have a goal and we're missing the mark. We have a goal that we're going after, and something just keeps getting us off course in our path, or in the shot that we're taking in life. And that's very important because we have to realize that we have to have a goal, that's the most important thing. If we don't have a goal in the spiritual life, we cannot be surprised that we're not achieving anything. Think about the people who decide to go to school, who decide to go get trained in a certain job, who go after a career, who fall in love and pursue that person that they're going to marry even if that person doesn't want to marry them, they have a goal. We have to have goals.

If we do not know what our goal is spiritually, this day, this week, this season, this year, we can't be surprised that we are not achieving goals spiritually. The other thing, even if we have a goal like shooting at the target with a bone arrow, we have to figure out what is our thing that is keeping us from achieving that goal. Because I can set some really high spiritual goals, I can set some really practical spiritual goals. But when I start pursuing them, Saint Theophan, tells us this clearly, it's easy to make a plan. It's really hard to fulfill it spiritually. It's very easy to describe how to live a holy life. There's even a little book in the bookstore called, How To Live A Holy Life. If you're trying, wanting to know how to do it, go buy the book.

## 2-17-19 - Sunday of the Pharisee and Publican © T. Hardenbrook



It's not hard to have a plan, it's hard to fulfill that plan. And we have to look at ourselves and say, "What is the thing that is keeping me from reaching the goal that I'm after spiritually?" It's not going to happen by osmosis, by association with the Church, or with God. It has to be goal-centered, and driven with zeal, with force of will, the father say. And so having looked at Zacchaeus last on, The Instinct, what is the thing about him that made him successful, although he was the worst person, in the worst town, in the worst area, with the worst job?

What was on the mark? What allowed him to not miss the mark, not sin, when it came to meeting Christ, encountering Christ, and being saved. So this Sunday we are presented with two more characters. We have the Publican and the Pharisee, the Pharisee and the Publican. They both are doing the same thing. In the story, they're going up to the temple to pray, but we can also imagine them out on the archery range. They both have the same intent and goal. They're going up to the temple to pray. Their goal is to pray, and they're going to try and hit that target of prayer.

One of them is seemingly unprepared. If we were betting on who was going to win, we would probably bet on the Pharisee. One is not prepared, the other is very prepared. Last year we looked very thoroughly if you would like to go online and listen to the homily, we looked very thoroughly at the pharisee himself, that he goes in so equipped to win the battle like Achilles. He's fasting, he's tithing, he literally is not like other people that he shouldn't be like.

But when we look at, what is going on? We discovered last year that when he goes into the temple to pray, he lifts up his head, and he prays with a vocabulary that is very spiritual. But when we pay attention to Christ telling this parable, he's praying with himself. He's not praying to God. He's praying to his ego. In realizing that he was well equipped to pray and to be in communion with God, he took credit for it himself. He made himself God, and therefore when he goes into the temple and prays, he is praying to himself, his own idol that he has made of himself, his own ego.

Where the Publican goes in ... And so the Pharisee, that is how he misses his mark. He has everything it takes to hit the target, and the unforeseen event is the intervention of his own ego. That is what gets his arrow off, and it misses the mark. When we look at the Publican coming in there, we've already heard about Zacchaeus, we've doubled down on how bad the Publicans are, the tax collectors, we already know very well what kind of people they are, but this Publican is a little different. When he goes into the temple to pray, which is a good thing and God bless him, and I think it's safe to say that none of the Publicans would've been welcomed in the temple. They may have been endured but not welcomed.

And he goes in, and he stands like the Pharisee stands, which is a good thing. He knows he's in the presence of God, but he goes off to the side, he goes into the wing of the church. He stands behind the column somewhere where hopefully nobody will notice him, and he can't even lift his head and he beats his breast. We know the kind of pain that causes us to strike our chest. "My Lord, the loss that I've incurred", he strikes his chest and he says very few words compared to the Pharisee, "God be gracious to me as a sinner."

## 2-17-19 - Sunday of the Pharisee and Publican © T. Hardenbrook



And his arrow is a perfect bullseye, a perfect bullseye. With the help of Christ, there is no fatal flaw, with the help of Christ there is nothing that can keep our arrow from striking home because, once we lose it, it is Christ who is driving it home. He's steering it. He is guarding it from the fatal flaws that we bring into our own lives. He makes it strike home. And what is it about the Publican? And we looked at Zacchaeus character last week, what does the character virtue rather than character flaw, of the Publican that makes his arrow strike home. That makes him not sin, although he's as sinner, that makes him one with God although so much of his life is foreign to godliness.

And we see that he has two primary virtues that we have to emulate ourselves as well. The first one is humility. When he comes in there, his head is low, his hiding behind the pillar, he's striking his chest, he has humility. He knows who he is. He knows that other people are better than him. He doesn't disagree with the Pharisee who is saying, "I've done all these wonderful things and I'm so glad I'm not like a lot of other people, especially him." Maybe he could hear him if in the icon, they're very close to each other. And he doesn't say anything. He doesn't defend himself, he doesn't justify his behavior, he doesn't say, "It's my job. Someone has to do it." He knows on the inside that although he has chosen to do what he is doing, it is not pleasing to God. He comes in with humility. He lowers his head and he asked for mercy. His second virtue is a part of humility, but I think it's important to point out which is that, he has no misunderstanding as to who he really is. None.

The pharisee is in delusion spiritually. The pharisee is suffering from what the fathers call, Prelest, total spiritual delusion. Praying to himself as a god and not even knowing it, not understanding, not knowing who he is. And yet to the Publican Comes knowing he's a sinner, knowing he has a terrible job, but coming in and knowing also that he has a need for the mercy of God, and for God to be in his life. So he doesn't miss the mark. He doesn't sin even though he's a sinner. What a paradox.

Can you feel that part of you on the inside from our Western tradition where we still think that we have to get somewhere before God is going to love us? We have to get better so that we can be more like God. We have to work our way into a place where we are then good enough to associate with God. And that is not the teaching from Christ himself, that is not the teaching out of the mouth of God himself. God meets us where we are. We hit the mark, we do not miss the mark if we have humility, and if we are willing to admit who we really are.

That's the lesson that we have to learn this morning, in preparing our own hearts. We don't want to sin, but let's get our mind onto realizing that sin is missing the goal that we're supposed to have and be pursuing. It's not being a bad person. We're all bad persons. Just get over it. Out of the mouths of babes, forgive me. Other than all of the children in the room, we are bad persons. The children are holy. They don't even have to go to confession.

And when we accept that ... I remember being in New York, in the office with Archbishop Demetrius and working with another priest on a project that we had, and we were looking at a list of a lot of clergy who were pretending to be a part of the Jerusalem patriarchy, literally pretending, not real priests. And we were going down the list and I knew some of them, and we were trying to identify them and figure out where they were. And at some point I just said

## 2-17-19 - Sunday of the Pharisee and Publican © T. Hardenbrook



impulsively, “What a bunch of weirdos”, and the priest, older than me, wiser than me, said, “Father, we’re all weirdos. Just that some of us are dangerous.”

And when we come to that kind of reality about ourselves, we come to realize we're all Publicans, we're all in need of God. And we are all in a life of sin. When we read the scriptures and we start identifying ourselves with the bad people in scripture, that's when we start learning who we really are. And with a little bit of humility, we embrace who we really are. We don't approve of who we really are, but we acknowledge it, we accept it.

You can't start growing if you don't know where you're at. You can't start climbing unless you know the ladder is there and you're on a low rung. There's nothing wrong with acknowledging that. But when we have our eyes on God and we set a goal, we pray that he will allow us to hit the mark of that goal. We bring him into our life through our humility and our authenticity, offering up who we really are, and letting him work through us and heal us. He will make us good, he will improve us, he will push us up the ladder, he will make us unworthy as we are, worthy to be called not only his servants, but his friends, adopted brothers and sisters to the Father, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.