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A migrant woman from El Salvador, part of a caravan traveling to the United States, prays during a stop Nov. 2, 2018, in Tecún Umán, Guatemala. (CNS/Reuters/Ueslei Marcelino)



by Mary M. McGlone

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Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

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Sirach 35:12-14, 16-18

Psalms 34

2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-18

Luke 18:9-14

Children seem to have an inbuilt capacity for competition — including when it comes to the love of their parents. In our house, any cry of "Mom likes me best!" was met with an indisputable statement like, "You are my favorite daughter named Mary and he is my favorite son named Tom." Mom had two other favorites: Mac and Maureen. That covered the inventory.

In spite of this, three of the four could get jealous as soon as one had a special need. When Mac broke his leg and became the center of concern, the other three strove in our own ways to capture special attention.

Ben Sirach, the homey philosopher we hear in today's first reading, tells us that God is just and has no favorites. Then Sirach goes on to list the ways God listens to the poor, the abandoned, the lowly, etc. That sounds like our house. No matter who was oldest, got the best grades, or won the tournament, the one most in need at the moment got the attention.

After hearing from Sirach, the poetry of Psalm 34 leads us to rejoice in God's care for the needy. The psalmist sings praise to God for confronting evil, for listening to the just and to the brokenhearted. The singer claims that we sing this song so that the lowly who hear it will be filled with hope.

That proposes an interesting principle by which to think about our own prayer: Does it offer hope to the poor?

Storyteller Jesus went beyond Sirach's ideas when he invited his listeners to imagine a two-person drama that fleshed out his teaching about prayer. (Luke uses this to prepare us for Jesus' upcoming dinner with Zacchaeus.) Jesus dedicated his parable/play to "those who were convinced of their own righteousness and despised everyone else."

He described his two characters in such color that they all but beg to be mimed. Jesus' wonderfully satiric portrayal contrasts an unassailably egoistic performer with a starkly humble petitioner. His invitation, of course, is for us to see ourselves in the characters — *both of them*.

The first was a Pharisee, a member of a seriously religious group that strove to obey God's law. This guy might as well have introduced himself with a haughty, "My name is Narcissus." According to Jesus' story, Archie (a nickname he hated!) took up his position and prayed to himself.

In case that statement didn't explain it all, Jesus quoted Archie's monologue. We can almost picture him there, posing as if for a mirror and itemizing his litany of personal qualities.

What we note while listening to his recital of virtue is that all his activity centers on keeping himself squeakily spotless and that each of his statements begins with "I." But blameless as he wanted to appear, he exposed himself as just the opposite.

He claimed not to be greedy, but he glanced at others only to demean them while maintaining his position as the center of his concern. He claimed to be honest, yet was not even honest enough with himself to be aware of his own weaknesses. He thanks God that he wasn't an adulterer, but in covenant terms, his self-worship expressed the very idolatry that the prophets traditionally labeled as Israel's prostitution.

He observed the letter of the laws of fasting and tithing, totally missing the point that fasting is oriented to help us put our own needs aside and tithing is to lead us to care for others. Psalm 34 says that God will destroy the remembrance of evildoers from the earth. Archie offered the world nothing by which he could be remembered.

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Jesus described Archie's counterpart as a tax collector. This fellow, let's call him Zack, assigned himself a place at the margins and bowed his head. His simple prayer was nothing more than an admission of sinfulness and a plea for mercy.

It seems that Zack didn't care what he looked like as he prayed. He came before God simply, as himself, begging for mercy and ready to accept it. His plea demonstrated his desire to move beyond selfishness. He was honest about who he was, and he looked to God for saving mercy. What would Archie have said if someone had pointed out that humble Zack actually fulfilled what he had claimed in his phony résumé?

Jesus' parable explains God's preferential option for the poor. The needs of the materially poor, like hurting children, call forth God's parental concern. But more than that, only those who know their need for God will pray in a way that God can answer. God likes us best when we are humble enough to admit to ask for help and are open to receive what God wants to give.

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