

When I was in seminary, I remember one afternoon going to the door of a classmate's apartment to speak with him about something, or other. I don't really remember the specifics, except for a sticker that someone had placed on the front door of my classmate's apartment.

It was a quote from St Francis de Sales, the Bishop of Geneva from the early 1600s. The quote was so hopeful, and so practical, which I later learned was a hallmark of Francis de Sales writings, that I committed it to memory.

The saint wrote:

The past must be abandoned to God's mercy, the present
to our fidelity, the future to divine providence.

I have taken great comfort in this wisdom over the years. We all have mistakes in our lives needing God's mercy. We all have challenges that call for our best faithfulness. We all know that the future is in God's gracious hands.

It seems to me, though, that it is quite challenging to keep these three in balance. It seems to me that Jesus' parable, and teaching this morning speaks to this. It seems to me that we often find ourselves in error, and potential trouble when we focus on the past, or present, or future exclusively.

To focus on the past, either our own, or that of another person, tempts us away from God's mercy. It leads us into the danger of believing that we, or others are outside of God's mercy.

To focus only on the present can bring about the idea that our worth, and value in God's eyes are only found in our abilities, and gifts. This is treacherously close to pride, the root of many, many sins, and errors.

To focus only on the future can cause us to ignore the needs of the present, and the fact that we are the body of Christ, alive, and active in the world today.

It is a challenge to keep these three views in balance. It is a challenge to know God's mercy, practice our faith diligently, and trust God deeply. But today's parable offers us a very subtle lesson on how we just might be able to do these things.

Jesus offers a scathing assessment of the pride, and arrogance of the religious leaders of his day. He compares them to the most despised sinners, the dregs of society, and he finds the sinners more righteous than the pious.

But it is too easy to read this parable in such black and white terms.

In fact, there is a significant amount of nuance in this parable, and it can be found in one single sentence. Jesus sums up the impact of his parable by saying,

Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you.

At first this sounds like a raging rebuke. No doubt, it was not taken as a gentle comment by Jesus' opponents. But consider Jesus' words carefully: "the tax collectors, and the prostitutes are going into the kingdom of God ahead of you."

Jesus does not say that the pious, and the righteous would not go into the kingdom of God, only that they are going into the kingdom of God after the sinners they so despised.

There is some very subtle grammar here that is worthy of our attention. Jesus is saying that the sinners are going into the kingdom of God. It is an active phrase Jesus uses here. Sinners are actually in the process, actively entering God's kingdom before the righteous.

The pious, even the precociously, and self-righteous pious, are still invited, and likely to enter God's kingdom but the unrighteous, the thieves, and traitors, and harlots, are already in the process of embracing God's kingdom, even before the religious leaders of the day.

How? Why? What is happening that would make this so? Because it is the broken among them, the wounded among us, the bruised, and failed, and needy in this world that know, all too well, the sins of their pasts, the weakness of their present lives, and the deep need for a hopeful future.

In other words, it is not the righteous, and especially not the self-righteous, that know their distinct, and abiding need for God. It is the failures, the broken, the lost that find God's mercy, struggle to be faithful, and trust in God's grace.

Our Lord does not seek holy people. Our Lord makes people holy and like many of the most profound truths in life this brings a paradox. The first, and truest sign of holy people is they know they are not holy.

The kingdom of God, as Jesus preached it, is not a realm in the distance. It is not a time in the future. It is not a reward for a job well done. The kingdom of God, as Jesus taught, and as Jesus offers us, is a life eternal that begins with each moment.

The kingdom of God is not then, It is now. It is not there, it is here. Whether we are sinners, or whether we are righteous, the first step, and every step, toward the kingdom is to

abandoned the past to God's mercy, the present to our fidelity, the future to divine providence.