HOMILY FOR PRAYER SERVICE
“WELCOME TO THE LIGHT OF GOD’S MERCY”
(Sunday October 23, 2016 – Thirtieth Sunday of Ordinary Time)
Sirach 35: 12-14, 16-18; Luke 18: 9-14

EVERYONE IS WELCOME IN THE BUS OF THE CHURCH

When I was pastor at St. Nicholas in Zanesville in the 1990s, my small church community used to sponsor an annual Christmas Carol Singing for some of the homebound folks of the parish. We would usually attract two busloads of people for this event. One year we set out and the first place we stopped was the farm of an elderly sister and brother who basically lived in squalor without electricity and running water. I had visited them several times before on my own and I always had to maneuver past their two mean dogs. I also had to watch where I stepped. Well the day of our caroling, one guy who was a real character didn’t watch where he stepped and he dragged it on to his bus. This was not the bus that I was on and I was determined that the two bus populations would be kept separate from then on. My bus was going to be the pure one. Stop after stop, the stench on the smelly bus got worse and worse as people kept stepping in what the fellow had carelessly brought onto their vehicle. But we aggressively kept our bus clean.

However, God has a sense of humor, as we all know, and he showed it that day. Our last stop was at the farm of the Mom of one of our deacons. This homestead was as far away from the parish church as you could get and still be in the county. As we pulled into her driveway, the bus I was on broke down in a dramatic way. It seemed like every fluid used in a motorized vehicle began to flow out from the bottom of our pristine chariot. After we sang our carols, there was nothing to do but for everyone to pile onto the smelly bus. Those of us who had considered ourselves protected had to swallow our pride and hold our noses and take the ribbing of those who welcomed us onto their bus – with much laughter and joking. It was a packed bus indeed – and I still remember the smell to this day. By the time we got back to the parish hall for refreshments, we had all without exception stepped in it – and we didn’t have appetites either!

I have always seen this experience as a paradigm of the church – as a metaphor of the People of God on our earthly pilgrimage to him in heaven. We all step in it along the way, don’t we? In Christian tradition, the boat (or “barque”) of Peter is symbolic of the church from the earliest centuries. Going back further, the church has also been compared to the ark of Noah which carried its passengers through the flood of this world’s dangers to safety. And I would observe that Noah had to be one of the world’s greatest sanitary engineers because on the ark he had to somehow manage plenty of the stuff we stepped in when we went caroling in Zanesville. Lots of animals on board! In modern times, the bus can be just as good a metaphor for the church as a boat was in the past.
In this evening’s Gospel from St. Luke, Jesus gives us the wonderful Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector. Pharisees were Jewish laymen very learned in the law of Moses and very strict interpreters of it. We’re not just talking about the Ten Commandments here, but also about the 600 plus rules that Moses gave to the people – rigid rules about how one must keep the Sabbath and the kosher and other dietary laws of the Jews etc. The term “Pharisee” literally means “those set apart” or “the pious ones” – which tells us a lot about how the Pharisees thought of themselves. They were hot stuff. The Hebrews respected them – and feared them. They were often good men worthy of respect. Jesus himself might have been considered a Pharisee because he was well acquainted with Jewish tradition and taught it – although with a merciful twist.

As for the tax collector in the parable, many Israelites would have despised him because he by definition was one of those men who collected taxes and road-tolls for the Roman rulers who oppressed the Jewish people. But scholars remind us that not all Jewish tax collectors were crooks. Some did not gouge the people but simply took a modest commission and many were probably buffers between the Jews and their Roman masters. Bottom line is that both Pharisees and Tax Collectors could be good people – or not. But Pharisees and many others hated the tax collectors as traitors.

The gist of this Parable is the contrast between the heart of the Pharisee and the heart of the tax collector. The Pharisee viewed himself as morally superior to others because he followed all the rules to a tee. Of course, following the rules can be good. But this man was perfect in his own eyes and thus he did not need God’s mercy. Indeed he did not need God (who is Mercy). As the Gospel says, he basically prays to himself here and not to God. The Pharisee was on the purest bus. But the tax collector is only too well aware of his faults and humbly asks for God’s mercy. He in effect begs God to come to him to relieve him of the burden of his sinfulness. The tax collector in his meekness is open to God. He knows he smells. The Pharisee in his pride blocks God.

Christ, even though he is sinless, is like the tax collector. Jesus’ attitude toward the Father is always an attitude of humility and obedience to his will. This attitude of obedience embraces all human people and, in the concrete situation of Jesus’ human life, he reaches out to everyone in mercy and love – especially those who have stepped in it. The church, the Body of Christ and the Spouse of Christ, is called to extend his embrace throughout history in every time and place. The human church, all too sinful at times, has often done this [shake finger] instead of this [show sign of embrace]. Let’s admit it, the church can be like the Pharisee – self-righteous, judgmental, hypercritical, lacking in mercy, even lacking in basic humanity. The church frequently has been afraid to reach out to those considered sinners – whether they are really sinners or not. The church in history and today is too frequently afraid to hop on the smelly bus where Jesus rides most of the time.
I firmly believe that the church is usually at its best and strives heroically to mirror Christ. I love the church that seeks out people where they are, not necessarily where they should be. I love the church whose priests and other ministers and her faithful go out to the margins to be with the poor, the sick, the misjudged, the sinners. I love the church whose leaders smell the sheep and smell like the sheep – after the teaching of Pope Francis. From the time I was a boy I have experienced this church and now joyfully minister in this church. But like the Pharisee, I have also sometimes been part of the darker church which condemns and abandons people – or maybe just bores them! The church has probably wounded many who are here tonight in small or big ways – and perhaps has even inflicted gashes on some or at least on folks we might know. On behalf of the church, I ask for your forgiveness.

Tonight in this Year of Mercy, we welcome everyone here to the Light of God’s Mercy. With Pope Francis, we at St. Paul’s want especially to walk with those who for whatever reason no longer feel comfortable in the church – who no longer feel the sweet embrace of Christ through the arms of his church. We want to accompany you on your journey to God. We, like the tax collector, admit our imperfections and want sincerely and even desperately to welcome you into the light of Christ’s understanding and compassion. If you want to be a part of the church, we want you to be with us

Tonight’s Service is inspired by Saint Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Like her, we the ministers and faithful of St. Paul’s want to be light. This remarkable saint experienced darkness in her own life – the darkness that often accompanies the authentic search for the God of love who is so mysterious and can seem so far away. And yet she without fail always met Christ the Son of God in the poorest of the poor to whom she ministered daily in the gutter. No matter how she felt inside, she smiled at Christ in the destitute and the dying. She wrote in one of her letters: “If I ever become a saint – I will surely be one of ‘darkness.’ I will continually be absent from Heaven – to light the light of those in darkness on earth –“ This awesome quote betokens Mother Teresa’s conviction that the beginning of heaven exists wherever we are good to one another – wherever we are light to each other. Her entire spiritual life was founded on Christ’s saying from the cross “I thirst” (John 19: 28). Jesus thirsts for souls. All who follow him are called to this thirst – called to be like Christ to genuinely chase after those who need him the most, so that his infinite thirst can be slaked a little. This call will take us to the smelly bus which Mother Teresa loved to be on because amazingly this is where she found heaven.

So I say again to everyone here: Welcome to the Light of God’s Mercy. May we be light in each other’s darkness as the church that is a servant to the world! May we be ready to minister to those whom the church has forgotten and perhaps has even tossed aside! May we have the courage to step off the clean bus where Christ will never be found!