

Pride and The Wall

Sirach 10:12-18
September 2, 2007

I.

The first reading we heard today was from the Book of the Wisdom of Sirach, which also is called the Book of Ecclesiasticus. It is found in the Apocrypha, which is a Greek word meaning "hidden things." The Apocrypha contains several books much like the biblical books in the Bible, and most of them were written during the two centuries before Christ's birth.

As background, Protestant and Jewish churches do not officially recognize the Apocrypha as part of the Bible, although the Catholic Church does do so. Nevertheless, we believe it contains some very important writings that can help us as we try to understand Scripture, and the Church has authorized certain readings from the Apocrypha to be used on Sundays in place of Scripture. Several publishers of Bibles have included the Apocrypha in their works.

Today's reading from Sirach warns us of the dangers of pride. This perhaps is the human failing with which we contend most frequently, and which seems to creep into much of what we do in life even though we think are modest, or humble, or unpretentious.

And there always is a catch to our efforts to avoid being prideful. I remember the story about the fellow who worked very hard to become humble, and when he finally thought that he had achieved humility he also found that he was proud of it.

II.

Well, with that, I'm going to digress briefly for a moment, but I can assure you that this all will come together in the end.

For many years before I went to Seminary I participated in a program called Kairos Prison Ministry. As part of a team of 25-35 men, we went into a state penitentiary in Virginia twice a year to present the inmates with a four day course on Christianity, much like Cursillo but behind bars. The purpose was to train the inmates to go out into the prison population and spread the Gospel, lead Bible Studies, and evangelize. And we followed-up with them on a regular basis in order to give them support in a difficult ministry.

Kairos is a national program with a structured approach to what happens during those four days. In general, it is a series of meditations, homilies, testimonies, songs, prayers, and other activities designed to bring the inmates to Christ, or to reaffirm their faith in Christ, in a step-by-step way. By the afternoon of the third day, which in the program is Saturday, we have come to a meditation called *The Wall*, which a team member reads to the inmates. It was written by Gloria Jay Evans, an author and illustrator of Christian books.

Its purpose is to cause the listeners to think about all of the different things that got them in trouble. Pride is at the heart of this meditation, and it is just as applicable to us here today as it is to those inmates. It goes like this.

III.

I don't know when I first began to build the wall. I suppose it was when it occurred to me that I could keep people out of my life by building a simple wall. The wall would be a kind of boundary, a kind of protection.

At first the little wall was only knee high. It was really quite attractive, made of native stone I had found in my life. The wall was so small that some people didn't notice it and would

stumble right over it and fall flat on their faces. Others saw it but would step over it and come very close to me. I found this very uncomfortable. So I built the wall higher.

This was really much better, but I found that some people would come and rest their arms on the wall while they talked to me. Some stayed too long. And some were not my kind of people. And even when I edged the top of the wall with sharp stones, they didn't seem to notice.

One day one of them vaulted over the wall and stood right inside. This made me angry and I decided to build the wall higher. As I continued to build, I became more and more self-sufficient. And soon, no one could see in or out.

But then I realized that no one had stopped by to talk for some time. Some people walked by not seeming to notice me or my wall. Others stood sadly by and watched me build. I thought they were jealous of my wall, and I resented them, all of them.

Some of the stones in my wall were so dear to me that I polished them carefully several times a day.

Then one day I realized the wall was so high that I no longer saw anyone go by, or heard anyone. "Is anyone out there?" I yelled. There was no answer. It was dark and the air was foul. I stayed there for a long time. It was quiet and dark and lonely. Only the whispers of my memories could be heard. One day, someone yelled from the other side, "Your wall is ugly. It is twisted and gray and misshapen!" Now, I did not accept this willingly. I liked my wall. In fact, some of the stones from which I had built it were very dear to me.

It was the day the flower fell at my feet that I began to cry. I ran to the wall and climbed to see who had thrown it over. By the time I reached the top, no one was there. I returned to the flower and sat for a long time looking at its perfection. Then I began to see the folly of my wall and its imperfection. Floods of tears brought me to my knees. "Oh, I am so alone. My wall is too high and too thick and ugly. I have nothing left. Won't someone help me, please?"

Then a strange thing happened. Something inside me stirred like a remembrance of peaceful times passed. And in the stillness of my broken world, I knew God that was there, a blessed presence; that God would come to me; and that my darkness had been penetrated by this blessed light. I stood in the joy of this presence. I knew that God had watched me build my wall and that God had waited patiently for me to see it was in vain.

Finally, it occurred to me that the Divine Creator would know why my wall was so ugly. When I asked, God began to teach me my error. God gave the stones names: "This stone is jealousy. You must remove it."

Sometimes I would protest. This was my favorite stone. It was one I had saved and cherished for years. But when I was finally ready, God helped me remove the stone. (And so it went, through stones named envy, disillusionment, resentment, childishness, stubbornness, some with God's help, sometimes with the help of strangers.)

As we removed more stones, the light came in. I felt a hand reaching through a small hole one day. Then a stranger walked in and told me he had let God tear down his wall. I told him how I had suffered so much, and that I would never forget how forsaken and lonely I had felt inside my wall. "Yes," he said, "self-pity is a terrible thing." When he left, I found my stone of self-pity in my wall. It was wet with my tears. I dried it off and laid it with the other stones I had taken from the wall.

Overwhelmed by all God had done for me and all God had taught me, I stood on a large remaining stone and began to tell anyone who passed by what God had done for me. I was

appalled that no one seemed to hear what I was saying. I noticed others working on walls and ran over to plead with them to stop, but no one would listen.

In my frustration, I lay face down on the stone I had stood upon. It was extremely large, highly polished! It was more than life size. "Do you want the answer to your question?" God asked. "Raise your head, and look at the stone you are lying upon." I raised my head and gasped, for I saw my own reflection in the massive stone. I knew the stone was pride. Quietly, we removed it.

Then God said a strange thing. "Now you must go. I will go with you and yet I will stay here." I protested, "There are still other stones to remove. I want you here."

"I said I would go with you. Do you remember the flower that fell at your feet, the hand that you clasped, the stranger who showed your self-pity?" "Oh, yes", I sighed, "Oh, yes."

"Then you must go and do likewise," God said. "For to whom much grace is given, much grace is expected. Wherever you go, I go with you. And whenever you come back here to be tempted, or to remove more stones, I will be here for you."

And so I went out. I saw the walls of others, and when I could, I threw a flower over, or reached my hand through. The walls were unbelievably ugly. I heard great sobs behind the walls and my heart ached. "Won't you please help this person?" I cried out to God one day.

I returned to my wall and God the Blessed Presence was there. Together we removed the stones of fear, mistrust, and indifference.

Then God said, "Now you begin to understand love. Without love the things I have told you would be meaningless. Now you will begin to live in peace and understanding of all those people around you whom you thought were not "your kind."

So it was that I went forth, reaching out, sometimes just waiting beside a wall, sometimes tossing a flower, sometimes grasping a hand.

Amen.