**My dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,**

**Were I to come down there and ask you, “Who are you?” Not what is your name? Or who are your parents? Or what do you do? But, “Who are you?” “How do you see yourself?” “Who are you really?”**

**The Holy Father, Pope Francis, was recently asked that question, “Who is Jorge Mario Bergoglio?” (That was his name before he became Pope Francis).**

**According to the reporter questioning him, Pope Francis stared at him in silence. The reporter then asked him if he may ask him this question. The Holy Father, the reporter said, nodded and then replied, “I do not know what might be the most fitting description….I am a sinner. This is the most accurate definition. It is not a figure of speech, a literary genre. I am a sinner.”**

**The Pope then reflected further, “Yes, perhaps I can say that I am a bit astute, that I can adapt to circumstances, but it is also true that I am a bit naïve. Yes, but the best summary, the one that comes from the inside and I feel most true is this: I am a sinner whom the Lord has looked upon.”**

**Now, that’s a lesson that the Pharisee in Jesus’ parable today apparently never learned. His prayer is kind of like an advertisement…like he’s trying to sell himself to God. No wonder St. Luke describes him the way he does, “The Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself…”. He prayed with himself. It wasn’t God he had to convince he was so good.**

**The tax collector, on the other hand, didn’t have to tell God who he was. He knew who he was and he knew that God knew who he was, just like the Holy Father knows who he is. His prayer is not about self-promotion, but a confession and a plea for mercy. He is not selling himself, but opening himself. And Jesus says, “It is this man who went home justified.” To be justified means to be declared “not guilty.” It means to be declared right. The tax collector is declared to be in the right relationship with God while the Pharisee, who is so certain of his own righteousness, is shown to be in the wrong relationship with god.**

**This doesn’t mean that the Pharisee was a bad person or that the tax collector was really a good person. Jesus doesn’t suggest that in this parable. The Pharisee was probably every bit as good and moral and generous as he claimed to be. In fact, the Pharisees enjoyed great respect among the people because of their high standards of morality, ethics, and piety. Nor does Jesus suggest that the tax collector was really a good guy at heart. He was very likely every bit as bad as his reputation made him out to be. It he hadn’t been crooked, he wouldn’t have been a tax collector in the first place, because the Romans couldn’t get honest people to be their lackeys.**

**In this parable Jesus is teaching us three radical truths about God:**

**1. God knows us as we really are.**

**2. God loves us just as we are.**

**3. Though God loves us just as we are, He never leaves us as we are.**

**To say that God knows us as we really are is to say that he knows not only our actions, but our motives, our intentions, our deepest and darkest secrets. He even knows what is in the depths of our unconscious minds.**

**Now that can be really scary if we buy into the “God rewards the good and punishes the bad” philosophy. If that’s how it works, I don’t know about you, but I’m in big trouble, because I’ve got things inside me that I wouldn’t want anyone else to know. There are things about me that are too private, too painful, too shameful to share with anyone. So, if I think that my acceptance by God or His love for me depends on Him not knowing about who I really am inside, then I’m lost. That’s why the news that God knows exactly who I am, better than I know myself, is such fantastic good news. I don’t have to pretend. I am who God knows me to be. I don’t have to be afraid of him finding out something that I’m ashamed of. I don’t have to close off part of my life to Him. He knows me with a knowledge that is deep and wonderful and intimate and infinite. That’s why St. Paul writes in his first letter to the Corinthians, “One day I shall know, even as I am fully known.” Isn’t that awesome! So, if you’ve got something to hide, don’t bother. God already knows more about you than you will ever know until that day dawns and you’ll be heaven by then.**

**The second lesson Jesus teaches us in this parable is even better than the first. God not only knows who I am, but he loves me just as I am right now! Here! Today! In this moment! Now this is radical good news because it goes against the way we think. If something good happens, we say we are blessed. When something bad happens, we get to thinking why is God punishing me. But Jesus is telling us that is not how God works. God is God. He is not an idol created in our image. God acts as God acts. And Jesus is telling us in this parable that God is a God who justifies the ungodly. He declares sinners to be in right relation to Himself. God declares sinners not guilty! God justifies the ungodly! Why? Because they are ungodly? No! God hates their ungodliness (is that a word—well it is now). God justifies them because they trust in him for their justification. They throw themselves on the mercy of God and God declares us righteous when we do it. That’s what it means to have faith—believing God will act like God and have mercy on us.**

**God loves us as we are. There’s not a sin so terrible, not a deed too awful, not a thought too horrible for him to forgive. What cuts us off from his forgiveness and the freedom such forgiveness brings is our thinking that we have to justify ourselves. That’s why we Catholics have such a beautiful gift in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. We alone among God’s People actually celebrate God’s already-forgiving love and have in the Sacrament an outward sign that satisfies us that we are forgiven! We are justified!**

**Yet the Catholics of this generation refuse to accept this beautiful gift. Why? God already knows your sins. Are you afraid of what the priest might think of you? What does it matter? I’m a sinner just like you are! And were I to say a word of your confession to anyone, I couldn’t pass GO; I couldn’t collect $200; I’d go straight to hell.**

**“Okay”, you say, “If God loves us just as we are, what’s the point in being good at all? Why not sin boldly and have a good time?” Ah, but here the third teaching of the parable comes into play. God knows who we are; He loves us as we are; but He never leaves us where we are. When God justifies us on the basis of our faith in Him, He also transforms us and makes us better than we are.**

**In forgiving us, God justifies us. But then God begins his cleansing and purifying work within us. That’s what we call sanctifying grace. God starts us with us just as He finds us, whether in a palace or a pig sty, but He doesn’t leave us there. God’s work is to make us holy.**

**This sanctifying work of God does not turn us into stained-glass saints overnight. God’s work within us is the most practical, down-to-earth work imaginable. When we open our lives to God’s gracious presence in prayer; when we no longer trust in our own morality or good behavior or will power, we find the most amazing things begin to happen. As we experience more of God’s love for us, we become more loving to others. People with bad tempers find that God’s spirit within them enables them to control their temper. People enslaved for years to alcohol or drug or gambling or pornography addictions find a resource that is beyond themselves and a source of strength to overcome these diseases of the soul. People with too much love of money and material things find that their values begin to change. People with deep insecurities and low self-esteem begin to see themselves and love themselves as God sees them and loves them.**

**All this doesn’t happen at once, of course. That’s another excuse Catholics use for not enjoying the Sacrament of Reconcilaition. “Why bother. I just keep confessing the same sins over and over again.” Discipleship, sanctification, spiritual maturity, whatever you want to call it, is a life-long process. It’s a journey! We don’t become saints overnight, but we do become. That is God’s work—to conform us into the very image of His Son, Jesus, the Christ.**

**That’s why I love the song we sing from time to time:**

 ***Saints are just sinners—who fall down and get up***

 ***Fall down and get up; Fall down and get up***

 ***Saints are just sinners who fall down and get up***

**How will you know that God is working in your life? The single identifying mark of God’s work in our lives is love. Do we love God and do we love one another.**

**As we move through this week to the celebration of the Saints who have gone before us, reflect on those Saints whom you admire, think about how their lives gradually became more Christ-like, in their love for God and others. Maybe allow their examples serve as a kind of test for your own sanctification, and ask God for the sanctifying grace to model your life on theirs.**