

Encounter with Myself

Sermon for the 11th Sunday after Trinity

Luke 18:9-14



⁹ He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt:
¹⁰ "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.
¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I

*tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For **everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.***"

Anyone who has been given common sense and two hands and two legs, and has managed to stay otherwise healthy, knows how to help themselves. For example, they can see to it that they get a good education and a good job. They can provide for their family. They can see to it that they are supported in their old age. After a long successful life, they can also thank God that everything went reasonably well. And with Psalm 139 they can pray: "I thank You that I am fearfully and wonderfully made..."

And yet, even for people with good common sense, there are days when you reach your limits. Where you realize you just can do it anymore and your strength runs out. Here's an example: the HR manager of a large company had labored away for 35 years. He had a high position in the company. Through hard work, an above-average IQ, and occasionally some luck, he had made it to the highest position in his company. But then came this awful pandemic. Everything had to be cut. He had to lay off countless good employees, often with tears. And then he found the very branch he sat on being sawed at. He was seized by great fear. The fear that he would lose everything plagued him day and night.... And one night, he did something that he hadn't done in a very long time: He asked God for help.... The prayer was answered. A merger with a partner company was successfully completed. His position was saved. And the HR manager caught himself thinking: "It went well. God helps those who help themselves."

How are you doing in these difficult Corona times? Is the future clear to you? Do you know what you must do to help yourself? Or are you perhaps in a hopeless situation: "Your asylum process got a negative answer. You can't work in Germany or learn a trade here. How do you deal with success?... How about your failure?"

In our text for today, Jesus tells us a story that strikes right in the heart. It's not just about what we can do, but also about our motivation. And Jesus picks out two extreme opposites from everyday life at that time: a Pharisee and a tax collector. At that time, the Pharisees were highly respected. The word Pharisee comes from the Hebrew word for "separated." The word had no negative meaning at the time and was even closely related to the word "to be holy." The Pharisees separated themselves from all the unclean things and from all sins and added more to the 10 Commandments that every Jew must follow. They gave more money, fasted more, and did more good works than anyone else. They could justly thank God that they were wonderfully made and could achieve such wonderful things. The Pharisee from our story, however, did not focus on God. He was all about himself. Instead of seeking God's righteousness, he called himself righteous. And he looks down on others. He compares himself to the tax collector. He looks down on someone considered the worst at that time. And next to him, the righteousness of the Pharisee shines even brighter than before. Jesus reproaches the Pharisee, saying his prayer won't be answered. Jesus reproaches him, because his prayer is just a conversation with himself. All of his good works are for nothing because he looks to himself and not to God. His motivation gets in the way. He believes in himself and not in God. Jesus deliberately exaggerates the Pharisee. He does this because he knows how we are. This way of thinking has gone on for generations, and we still see it in our own lives. Who doesn't compare themselves with others? Students compare themselves to others and feel better when someone has a lower grade. The downward directed comparison has even become a method to make ourselves feel better: "There is so much evil in the world. However, I have never harmed a person or an animal." Looking down on others makes us feel better. This also helps us cover up our own mistakes. It can even go so far, that looking down on others who are weaker turns to hate. Unfortunately, there also currently flareups of hatred in social media...Hatred towards people of different ancestry, culture, or political positions. When you complain about them, it has the same effect: you perceive yourself as being better.

Jesus contrasts the prayer of the Pharisee with that of the tax collector. The tax collector could not be more different than the Pharisee. The tax collector had to collect taxes. Therefore, they had to go into peoples' homes and encounter many unclean things. Besides that, they had the reputation of collecting more money than they were supposed to. They were very unpopular. A Roman contemporary even wrote down 39 swear words for tax collectors. And this same tax collector came into the house of prayer just like the Pharisee. But he stood a long way off. He didn't even have the courage to pray. He was well aware of his sins and his imperfections. He only knew the one prayer from Psalm 51. "God be merciful to me, a sinner! Lord have mercy!" The prayer of the tax collector is short, but it is sincere, and the most important thing is that he speaks with God and not with himself. He also beats himself on his breast as a sign of remorse and repentance. The heart is the place where the mind is, the place where sin is thought out and planned... He knows in his heart that he is separated from God.... and asks for grace... Who prays like this tax collector prayed? It is difficult for us humans to admit a mistake. We prefer to deal with guilt and failure differently. Most of the time, we get along well with our many excuses. We can hide them from others. And that's why we don't like to talk about our guilt. Is there a safe place where we can still do that?

Jesus gives us these two examples because he wants to address our mindset. Where can I find myself again? Which mindset do I have? The mindset of the Pharisee or the mindset of the tax collector? What comes out of the mouth of the Pharisee and of the tax collector lies in their respective stories. Which story am I? What do I think about God? What do I think about myself? Jesus wants to break our

preconceived ideas and prejudices. He wants us to see God and our fellow human beings differently. It's clear that I can see myself in both the Pharisee and the tax collector. Perhaps that is exactly the challenge that I don't always understand. When am I the Pharisee and when am I the tax collector? Sometimes I can even be proud as the tax collector, that I don't complain about others like the Pharisee, but rather am humble. Sometimes, I unconsciously slip into the role of the Pharisee and find joy in the fact that others are in a slightly worse position than I am. Again and again, we realize that we are reaching our limits in our desire and accomplishment. We cannot control the heart and mind.

And that brings us to the most important question. What does God think about all of this. Through the eyes of Jesus, we know God's will. And we learn through it that God truly wants and loves to forgive. God wants to be gracious. And He loves it so much that he is gracious even to the tax collector. The Pharisee doesn't really need this God because he is enough for himself. But he can also be changed. In his *Chronicles of Narnia*, C.S. Lewis describes a proud character "Eustace" who always wants to be better than everyone else. And because of this, he makes life difficult for the others. One day, his greed drives him into a dragon's cave where he finds treasure. By taking the treasure for himself, he takes on the characteristics of the dragon and becomes an ugly dragon himself. Eustace eventually suffers from his dragon skin and wants to be freed from it. However, he can't free himself. But there is an encounter with the lion, Aslan. Only Aslan can remove the dragon skin. He does so. Slow and steady... sometimes painfully, Aslan finally frees Eustace of the dragon skin. And so he creates a new personality within Eustace. Eustace becomes kind and loving towards people. C.S. Lewis wants to illustrate with this story that Jesus is the Lion who alone can free us from our dragon skin. Jesus changes people. Without Him, we cannot free ourselves. Every encounter, whether Christian or non-Christian is an encounter God has given me. Through the encounter, I recognize my own need... I also recognize the needs of others... and there is always reason to pray: Lord have mercy! And there is always reason to give thanks! Thank you, Jesus, that was necessary. Without you, it is not possible! Amen.