

**Shepherd of the Springs Lutheran Church
11th Sunday after Trinity**

Text: Luke 18: 9-14

Theme: The Problem of Sin: Where is the Alarm?

. . . everyone who exalts himself will be humbled but the one who humbles himself will be exalted. (vs 14)

Other than stalwart devotees of Christian science, most all people would acknowledge that the world suffers from a problem of evil and that it afflicts mankind even themselves. The major point of contention is over the question of how people see themselves in relation to the problem. Are they, for the most part, the victims of the evil and wrongdoing that others inflict upon themselves or do they see themselves as major perpetrators? And what about their concern over sin and evil in the world? Is their major alarm over the people in life they have to put up with, or do they see the major problem as lying within. How about you? Where is your alarm? Where is it this day? The parable that Jesus told in our Gospel today, invites us all to ponder these questions, that we might go home with confidence that, like the tax collector, we are justified before God in Christ Jesus.

Let's rehearse the parable. Two men, a pharisee and a tax collector, went up to the temple to pray - one to offer a prayer of thanksgiving and the other for petitionary prayer. The pharisee prays a prayer of thanksgiving thanking God that he is not a great sinner like many others who engage in gross sins like extortioners, adulterers and . . . well, like the tax collector he spies with him in the temple. To present as evidence to the Lord that he is much better than these, he offers his regular fasting and his habit of offering tithes of all that he has. By contrast the publican, or tax collector if you will, standing in the rear, beat his breast as his head hung low in remorse and begged God to be merciful to him a sinner. It is this latter wretched fellow that Jesus indicates goes home justified.

Notice that concerning our question about the major perpetrators of sin and evil in the world - is the problem other people, or does the major problem lie within yourself - the pharisee and the tax collector seem to be in agreement. Both agree that it is the tax collector, not the pharisee, who is the major problem. On that basis, most would think that the consensus good guy, the pharisee, should be the one who goes home justified, not the manifest sinner. But that is not the way the story goes. And then in the punch-line at the end, Jesus generalizes His point with a paradox: *everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.* What are we to make of all this?

Lets first consider some things that this parable is *not* about when it presents us these two who go to the temple for prayer. This is not a story that contrasts people who think they are perfect and without sin from those who think they had better

improve. There is nothing in this story to lead us to believe that this pharisee thinks that he is not effected by the problem of sin or that there are not areas in his life that he would admit the need to improve. But then also, there is nothing to lead us to think that the publican thinks that his life with God hinges on the necessity that he *must* improve. Secondly, this parable is not about decorum or manners in God's house of worship. It is not suggesting that petitionary prayer is the preferred way to pray, as if prayers of thanksgiving for God's blessings in life are really out of place. And we would be remiss if we thought that leading a pious life is of no importance; as if grace were a license for sin. Well, then what is this parable about?

This is a story about attitudes and focus as you recognize that there is sin in the world and as you also understand that you yourself are not perfect. Yet given that understanding, this parable is about two different ways of seeing where the most alarming aspects of the problem of sin are located. The pharisee represents those who know they are not perfect, but are convinced that others, not they themselves are the major problem. They are much better than others they can think of, and they are proud and thankful for that And in contrast, the tax collector portrays sinners who know that they are at the bottom of the barrel. . . sinners who see themselves as the major problem and are alarmed and grieved about it. When they think of the great sinners of this world and those who are especially in need of God's mercy, they think first and foremost of themselves. This story is about how people who understand they are not perfect, but good enough . . . over against those who are quite convinced they are completely out of the running. The objective of the parable as it is told again and again in the life of the Church is to put the question to each of us - again and again - including also this morning: *What about me?* How do I see myself? When it comes to sizing up the problem of sin in the world right now: is your sinfulness the main problem that alarms you or does it lie with others around you? When you go casting about to put the matter of sin in the world into focus before God: who's sin do you want to complain about? Who's sin really bothers and upsets you? Yours or others?

Now if you are like the pharisee, if you simply have to put up with people who are the real problems in life . . . well then, in relation to the Kingdom of God, you yourself have become a big problem for which there is actually no solution. You see, Jesus died for the guilty perpetrators, not the innocent victims who know, of course, that they are not perfect. He died for the bad guys and girls not the fairly good ones who are doing better than others. The outrageous point of the parable is that there is hope for the wretched perpetrators, but not for the innocent victims who have done little seriously wrong and have much they can advance to their own credit. The Good News of the Gospel is that Jesus died for the ungodly, not the mostly godly. Where do you find yourself in this division? Are you the problem, or do you just see them around you a lot in life? This is not a question to be answered once for all, but it is a question that is to confront us continually in life as needing to be answered again and again. The sinful rebellious fleshly self in all of us wants to see ourselves mostly as victims who

deserve better and it wants to see ourselves as doing better than many others and we want this big lie about ourselves to stand even before God. Yet, the truth is our continuing receptivity to the grace of Christ depends on being alarmed and concerned about our own sinful condition. Can I still see that I am the main problem of sin, or has it become those around me in life? That is the question that this parable poses for each of us this morning.

If you are one who can identify with the publican, if you see yourself as one of the hopeless ones who is out of the running and realize that you will live by the grace of God or not at all . . . Well then, you may go home today with confidence that you are justified. God is gracious to those who are themselves the real problem of sin in the world and desire only the mercy of God.

The key point is this. Your attitude toward your own sin, not your attitude about the sin of others, is what determines your receptivity to the grace of Christ. When you see yourself as doing rather OK over against the greater sinfulness of others - This prevents humble repentance. Hunger for the Gospel is a function of animosity and regret toward your own sinfulness, not that of others. The repentant heart is the heart that is hungry for God mercy. If you do not have an appetite for grace, the lack of hunger is due to a sense of self-sufficiency. Boredom about the Gospel is a function of feeling OK about yourself. And if you feel OK about yourself apart from the grace of Christ, you're not. The issue for each of us is not how have we seen ourselves in the past, but how do we see ourselves today as we have come this day to the house of God to pray.

Humility is the issue here and it is always the issue when we would come to God to pray and worship. But we must be clear about the role of humility. When Jesus says that the one who humbles himself will be exalted, He does not mean that humility is some kind of justifying virtue. Humility does not cover a multitude of sins. The issue here is not between virtues and vice. Humility simply asks for the graciousness of the Lord - and that is what covers a multitude of sins. *Oh Lord be merciful to me a poor sinful human being!* The humble are exalted only by the righteousness of Christ. And so are you!

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. A-men.