

The Sixth Sunday After Pentecost – July 12, 15, 16, 2006

St. Mark's Evangelical Lutheran Church – Watertown, WI

DON'T THINK MORE OF YOURSELF Acts 8:9-24

Have you ever compared yourself to someone else? Do you realize that for most young people since they were born they have been compared to someone else? When parents take children in for their six week check-up and for succeeding doctor visits they are told that the height of their child is in the 85th percentile and their child's weight is in the 95th percentile. Or they may hear that their child is normal for their age or they are off the charts in either their height or weight for children of the same age. When you enter school there is continual comparing that goes on. You are compared with other children according to your athletic abilities or your mental gifts. If you are not the oldest child in your family, you may be compared by your teachers to older brothers and sisters they may have had in class. Not only do we have teachers comparing us to certain standards by our abilities and talents, we also have classmates who compare themselves to us. Then we may sometimes even have parents and relatives comparing us to other members of our families.

If someone has been blessed by God with a specific talent or ability, there is a danger that may go to the person's head and they will begin to think of themselves more highly than others. We all know people; we may even work with people who have a tendency to think more of themselves than they ought. Such people can become overbearing, haughty and snobbish. Even in the area of spirituality and our relationship with Jesus Christ, we may run across people who think they have it all right and look down on others who they assume don't have a clue or may not have all the pieces put together.

Before Jesus left this world he gave everyone who is one of his followers an assignment. He told us that we are to be his witnesses. We are to begin in our own community and then branch out into our state, our country and finally to the ends of the world. Jesus' specifics for his disciples were to begin in Jerusalem, Judea, and Samaria and to the ends of the world. In our reading for today we see how the Lord got the Word to the Samaritans. As we consider Luke's account of the bringing of the good news of forgiveness and eternal life to the people of Samaria let's focus on this thought **DON'T THINK MORE OF YOURSELF.**

THIS IS A REAL DANGER

It is very easy to consider yourself better than others. As we play the comparing game, we can usually find someone who does not have the same gifts and abilities that we have. Consider Simon in Samaria. Here was a man who the Bible calls a magician. He had powers and abilities that caught people's attention and wowed them. In fact he had done this for quite some time. People both great and small considered him to have the power of God and they called him Great. Simon was considered a powerful and influential person by the people of his city and he considered himself the same.

Then along came a man named Philip. Where did he come from? Who was he? He came from Jerusalem. He was one of the seven men who had been chosen by the church in Jerusalem to serve as a deacon. His duty was to see to the distribution of food for the widows in the church. However, after Stephen had been stoned to death a great persecution of the Christians took place in Jerusalem and the believers were forced to leave their homes and flee for their lives. Philip ended up in Samaria, north of Jerusalem. Now Samaritans and Jews got along like the Palestinians and Jews do today. They didn't. In fact, Jews often looked down on Samaritans. Many of the Samaritans were descended from Jews who had intermarried with non-Jewish people. So they were considered inferior and impure.

When Philip came to these people he proclaimed the good news about the kingdom of God. He did not look down on these people and think, "I'm better than you. You aren't good enough to hear the good news." Philip told these Samaritans the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ. He baptized both men and women. This message also caught the attention of Simon the magician. He believed the good news and was also baptized. Luke tells us that Simon sort of attached himself to Philip because he was amazed at all the signs and great powers that Philip was exercising as he told others about Jesus.

When the message got back to Jerusalem that even the Samaritans were putting their faith in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord, the church sent Peter and John to check this out. These men may have had some questions about this too. Remember the culture they had been raised in. Samaritans were second class citizens. Could they really be part of the church of Jesus? When Peter and John arrived they found this to be true. These people believed. However, they had not received any of the special gifts of the Holy Spirit that the disciples had received on Pentecost. So Peter and John laid their hands upon the Samaritans and they received this special out pouring of the Spirit and received the same gifts that God had given to his disciples in Jerusalem. It was clear evidence to the Apostles that they were no better than the Samaritans and that the Samaritans were part of Jesus' church too.

THIS WAS NOT A PROBLEM FOR JESUS

At times we human beings have problems when we look at others and we begin to think of ourselves more than we should. We saw that in Simon the magician. That was a problem for the Apostles as the

Gospel was spread beyond the Jewish community. However, it was not a problem for Jesus whose name and kingdom Philip was announcing.

Jesus, the Almighty God- Man, had every reason to consider himself more than the people he lived and worked among. After all, he was holy and perfect. He was the Creator of the universe; the provider of all things, the protector of all people. Yet the Bible tell us that he did not consider equality with God a prize to hold on to, but humbled himself and took on the form of a servant and became one of us. He came to this world to serve us and to give his life as a ransom for all people.

As you read about the ministry of Jesus you see him criticized for hanging around with the wrong type of people. He wasn't fraternizing with the good people. He always seemed to be with the corrupt and crooked tax collectors, with the prostitutes, with those whose lives were a mess because of their sins, with those who were stricken with incurable diseases.

How could Jesus do this? He understood his mission. He came to seek and to save the lost. He came to proclaim peace and forgiveness for all the people of this world. You see Jesus loves everyone. He is not selective when it comes to his love and pardon. Philip understood that and he faithfully carried out Jesus command as he went into Samaria.

OUR CHALLENGES AS WE DEAL WITH OTHERS

Just because we believe in Jesus doesn't mean we always get it right. Look what happened to Simon the magician. When he saw the gifts that were given when Peter and John laid their hands upon the Samaritans, he had a proposition. He said to the Apostles, "how much?" He was willing to pay them to receive this same ability to lay his hands upon people and give them the power of the Holy Spirit.

Listen to Peter's response to Simon's request, "May your money perish with you, because you thought you could buy the gift of God with money! You have no part or share in this ministry, because your heart is not right before God. Repent of this wickedness and pray to the Lord. Perhaps he will forgive you for having such a thought in your heart. For I see that you are full of bitterness and captive to sin." (Vv. 20-23) Peter calls for Simon to repent, to turn from his sinful thoughts and desires, to see God's pardon and correct his ways. Simon may have seen this purchasing of this special power to bestow the gifts of the Holy Spirit as a way to become big again in the eyes of the people of his city. Remember he had once been looked up to as a great and powerful person when he practiced his magic and black arts. Peter calls for him to repent.

There are times when you and I also need to repent, when we start thinking of ourselves more than others. That danger is always there to fall back into our sinful thinking, speaking and acting. We need to heed Peter's call for a change in Simon and apply it to ourselves when the shoe fits.

Simon sought the Apostle's prayers for him so that God would pardon and help him to overcome this sin in his life.

That danger exists for many of us when we compare ourselves to others, to begin to think of ourselves more highly than we ought. As we go back to the Word of God, we learn that we are special, precious and gifted totally because of what God has done for each of us and given to each of us. Remember that you are so precious that the Almighty God gave his life for your sins and made you his child through Holy Baptism and has prepared a place for you in his heavenly kingdom. Then look at the gifts that God has given to you not to someone else and don't compare yourself to what someone else has received. Rather thank God for what he has gifted you with and develop and use those gifts as you serve the Lord and others in this world.

Amen.