

Gospel text

Luke 18: 9-14

9 Then Jesus spoke a parable to those who were convinced that they were well adjusted to God's world and considered those who were different from them as worthless. 10 "Two men went up the temple hill to pray, one a very religious Pharisee, and the other a tax collector. 11 The Pharisee stood up straight and prayed to himself, 'Lord, I thank you that I am not like the others, who are greedy, do not keep the law, are adulterers, or like this fellow who collects taxes (with a profit margin). 12 I fast twice a week and pay a tithe on everything I buy.' 13 The tax collector, on the other hand, stood at a distance, not even daring to raise his eyes to heaven, but beating his chest with the words, 'Lord, act favorably toward me who have committed many offenses.' 14 I assure you, the latter returned home well adjusted to the world of God, unlike the other. For whoever thinks he is great will find that he is small, but whoever thinks he is small will find that he is great."

Gospel commentary – Homily

What does it mean to be well adjusted to God's world?

Amelie¹ started at the age of 15 to suffer from strange symptoms. Vision problems, balance problems, unexplained and unexplainable suffering. For years, she consulted specialists. Multiple sclerosis? Fibromyalgia? Remnants of mononucleosis? For years, no one could identify what was ailing her. Suffering is a full-time job. Nevertheless, she remained radiant and persevered in her studies. But eventually she developed an anxiety disorder. Sleeping became more and more difficult.

Finally, at the age of 22, the diagnosis was found, thanks to blood tests sent to the United States for analysis: babesiosis. Translation: Lyme disease, the infection that is transmitted by the bite of a tick. Finally, a little hope, because Lyme disease is treatable, if properly diagnosed.

But Amelie's head was not right at all. Anxiety gripped her. She was not sleeping. One day, she asked her brother to make a noose for her: she wanted to hang herself. Alerted, the parents immediately took her to the local psychiatric hospital. The psychiatrist simply prescribed her sleeping pills. When she returned to her parents' residence, she fled at night to their second home in the country where she tried to take her own life by drowning, after having ingested a whole bottle of alcohol. Thanks to her cell phone signal, she is found half-conscious on the shore of the lake. It is the race to the psychiatric emergency of the place. A psychiatrist sees her, looks at her condescendingly, and tells her that he can't treat her because she doesn't live in this town. Back in the big city in her parents' condo, she learns that the following week a sympathetic psychiatrist will be able to see her. Unfortunately, in the wee hours of the morning, unbeknownst to her parents, she manages to throw herself down from the 16th floor of the condo.

This is a long and sad story that I just told. I wanted to tell it because it is about mental illness, an illness that does not appear to be a "noble" illness as cancer is for example (one only has to observe the reaction of people to the announcement of one or the other illness). But this story is also about doctors whose attitude can have dramatic consequences. And this is the context in which I want to read today's gospel.

The story is very familiar to those who regularly attend the gospels: the story of the Pharisee praying in the temple, on the one hand, who thanks God for being different and better than others by not being a thief or an adulterer, who makes sure he is religious by fasting and following the law of tithing, and on the other hand this tax collector, a profession where people did not hesitate to give themselves a profit margin, and were seen as collaborators with the Romans, who prays to God to have mercy on the sinner he is. In order to understand this story, we need to focus on two words: just or justify, and despise.

One must be situated in the Jewish context of the Old Testament to understand what justification and being righteous means. For a Jew, God had chosen a people whom he had saved from the Egyptian yoke through the mediation of Moses. In return, he demanded fidelity to the covenant, first summarized in the Ten Commandments, then developed through numerous laws recorded in the great book of the Law (Torah). To be righteous was to be faithful to the Law, and to be justified was to be considered "adjusted" to God by respecting the covenant. The event of Jesus changed everything, because it was in the name of the Law that the Jewish authorities had him condemned to death, so that Paul, at first an ardent defender of the Law, could say: it is not by the Law that we are "adjusted" to God, but by letting the power that has come from the risen Jesus act in us and by welcoming in faith his word and his humble way of a love that goes so far as to give his life; there is no recipe for being adjusted to God, other than recognizing that this project is beyond us, and surrendering ourselves in faith to the power of the risen Jesus and allowing ourselves to be carried wherever it leads us.

What does it mean to despise someone? The Greek word Luke uses means: to consider as nothing. To despise someone is to consider them worthless. I asked myself: when do we ever despise someone? Let's take Donald Trump. He considers himself a "winner", and he has nothing but contempt for "losers". Why? A loser questions his supreme value. Personally, I am a biblical scholar who spends a lot of time studying every Greek word in the New Testament and analyzing its relationship to the corresponding Hebrew word. The temptation is strong to look down on my neighbor who knows absolutely nothing about the Bible, who spends his time fixing his fence and improving his property; he questions the importance I place on the Bible.

In our story, the Pharisee considers himself "adjusted" to God's world because he follows all the observances of the Law to the letter, and he has nothing but contempt for the tax collector who probably ignores most of these points of the Law, not to

mention his inability to keep them. What is the problem? According to the evangelist Luke, the Pharisee has a complete misunderstanding of what it means to be "adjusted" to God's world. To give us an idea of what it means to be adjusted to the world of God, Luke presents us in the following account a conflict between Jesus and his disciples when the latter want to prevent people from bringing to the "master" babies, those beings considered worthless in ancient times: "Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the Kingdom of God belongs to those who are like them," Jesus will answer them. There is no such thing as worthless people for Jesus. And according to Luke, babies, who are only needs, only cries for help, show us the way to the Kingdom. This is what the tax collector is in our story.

What to conclude? The Pharisee and the tax collector represent two dimensions of ourselves. The Pharisee symbolizes the achievements of our life, what we are proud of, our competence, what sets us apart from others. The tax collector symbolizes a part of our life that we may want to forget, that we are ashamed of, or that we consider worthless or waste; how we would like to get rid of that part of ourselves. Unfortunately, we cannot grow up without reconciling these two facets. More than that, it is that part of ourselves that we would like to eliminate that is our "salvation", for it is this part that allows us to understand others and to remain in communion with suffering humanity, it is this part that makes us pray to ask for help, and it is basically this part that creates the space for the strength of the mystery of love at the source of this world to enter.

Let's go back to Amelie. In her moments of mindfulness, how did she perceive her mental illness? Did she hate it? Was she willing to accept it and seek help? What is certain is that she unfortunately experienced the lack of importance given to this illness, a "shameful" illness. In the world of medicine, the psychiatrist takes center stage. But the temptation is strong to fall into contempt for uninteresting cases. For a follower of Jesus, no one is worthless. This is good news for everyone. For even what makes us feel a little ashamed or hurt can serve as a gateway to a transforming force, which allows us to love better, and thus to move on in the unending process of being adjusted to God's world.

-André Gilbert, Gatineau, October 2022

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