Sunday, June 14, 1981
THE PROBLEM OF COMPARING
I Samuel 9:1-2, 18:6-9; Luke 18:9-14

Start with a wrong assumption and you are sure to end up with a mistaken conclusion. It's something we all do over and over again. To make matters worse, most of us do not often examine the basic assumptions which underlie many of our beliefs and actions.

In the parable read from the Gospel of Luke this morning, the Pharisee simply assumed that he was automatically better than most other human beings because he worshipped God in the right way. He even went on to assume that God loved him more than others. He was regular in his religious devotions and belonged to the right church, or so he thought.

It happens all the time. In another story from the Gospels, Jesus met a man who had been born blind and his disciples mistakenly concluded that his blindness was caused by the man's own sin or his parent's sin. Their false assumption was that all handicaps or physical disabilities are the direct result of someone's sin. Jesus had to correct their basic assumption which then led to a different conclusion.

When Jesus welcomed all kinds of sinners into his company and when he went to their homes and ate with them and treated them with respect and dignity, those around him who saw his attitude and actions falsely assumed that he was thereby encouraging or condoning their sin. Rather he was acting on the assumption that God loves all human beings.

Wrong assumptions lead to mistaken conclusions. If we want to begin with the false assumption that God loves some people more than others, then we have a license to practice all kinds of discrimination. Or it we want to begin with the false assumption that it's really our church and not Christ's church, then too, we can make all kinds of distinctions that Jesus Christ would not make.

But it's really another kind of false assumption that I want to talk about this morning. It's the mistaken assumption that our human worth, our value as human beings is to be found primarily in comparing ourselves with others. This wrong assumption leads to many mistaken conclusion and actions in relation to ourselves, to others, and to God.

What I mean is this: many people have a sort of pulley system of evaluating themselves and others. It's the problem of comparing. On this pulley system, we go up when someone else goes down, and we go down when someone else goes up. Our emotional mood, our sense of worth keeps shifting in relation to what's happening to others in comparison to what's happening to us.

So, if I meet or hear someone who is a better preacher, I tend to think of myself as a worse preacher, or conversely if I meet or hear someone who seems to me to be a worse preacher, I think of myself as a better preacher. What I forget is that I still have the same talents I've always had, no more, no less. Someone else's talents do not devalue mine, nor mine devalue theirs. We tend to make ourselves the measure of all things.

Many of us judge ourselves and others on this false basis. If we meet someone richer, we feel poorer; someone more handsome, we feel ugly; someone more fluent; we feel tongue-tied; if they are up, we are down.

Conversely, many of us cannot feel comfortable unless we are pulling others down. We falsely believe that we rise by their lowliness; if he is uglier, I am more handsome; if he is failing, then I am doing better; if he is poorer, then I am richer. We love to point out the sin in others, particularly those sins which we think we are free of, in order to make ourselves look better. Much of human prejudice remains alive to serve this purpose.

The Pharisee in Luke's story prayed in that manner, "God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." He was attempting to find his self-worth or raise his self-esteem by comparing himself to others whom he considered to be more sinful.

In the story we read from I Samuel this morning, King Saul of Israel had the same problem. We are told first that Saul was a handsome young man. Tn fact there was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome tl1an he.

Saul had a lot going for him. Not only was he handsome, but he was a good leader. The prophet Samuel had chosen him to be the first King of Israel. As King he did a lot for his people and he was an outstanding military leader as well.

But then one day Saul made the mistake of comparing. He had previously chosen a young man named David to be one of his top military leaders and it was a good choice.

Then, however David became too successful, too popular for Saul. As they were returning home from battle one day, the women came out of all the cities of Israel, singing and dancing to meet King Saul and David, and they sang, "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his ten thousands."

Envy and jealousy began to grow in Saul. He said to himself, "They have ascribed to David ten thousands, and to me they have ascribed thousands." Instead of rejoicing with David in his success and popularity, he was envious. It's one of the most insidious diseases that can infect any one of us.

The envy in Saul also grew because he failed to realize the partialness of all human accomplishments. Who among us ever fulfills our fondest dreams totally or completely? I need to realize that at best I am a tiny part of a great process that flows both before me and on after me. I have a part to play, but not a total part, and wise in the one who senses this and comes to terms with it.

Seemingly Saul never did this, which is why he seemed more a failure to himself than he really was. The difference between our reach and our grasp — our aspirations and our achievements — this is the crucial reality to acknowledge and accept.

For some reason, Saul was never able to accept fully who he was and what he was supposed to do under God. He never found the security of saying, "By the grace of God, I am what I am and I am where I am." Saul kept comparing himself to others and tried to obtain his sense of place and worth in that fashion and it leads always to disaster.

When we are up because others are down, it leads to the disaster of false pride and self-righteousness. And when we are down because others are up, it leads to envy and jealousy,

self-doubt and despair. Then this self-doubt and jealousy grow into self-despising which is the root problem behind so many of our present day disorders.

Our human society is not a pulley system. God has not made the world so that we improve only at the expense of others going down or vice versa. It's the problem of comparing.

An older farmer was moodily regarding the ravages of a flood. When he yelled a neighbor, "your pigs were all washed down the creek." "How about Thompson's pigs;" Hiram asked. "They're gone too," came the reply. "and Larsen's?" "Those are lost too." "Hmph," said Hiram, cheering up, "it aint as bad as I thought."

Because of our interminable tendency to always be comparing ourselves with others, we find it difficult to even rejoice in the good fortune of our friends. The novelist, Gore Vidal put it this way, "Every time a friend succeeds, I die a little."

I remember in a previous parish about 15 years ago, I received a phone call from a young woman. I could tell that she was crying. As her tears abated, there was still quivering in her voice, and a touch of shuddering in her tone and outlook. Something had gone terribly wrong. As she quieted down, she brought up the name of someone I knew to be her best friend. Had Norma, let's call her, been taken ill? How long has she to live? Was there an auto accident? Cancer? None of that. I breathed more easily. Was there a misunderstanding, a falling out? Had one of them slammed the door in the other's face? Did they need a veteran arbitrator to thaw their frozen relations?

All of that said my friend, she could have coped with on her own. What then was the problem? It turned out that there was a vacancy in their organization. Someone had to move on or move up. My friend sounded as if she felt that she was next in line, ready to win the most qualified candidate of the year award. Good! She deserved it! Could she live with disappointment if management had the bad sense to pass her up? Yes and no. truthfully Yes? Because they might bring in someone from out of town, somewhere else in the firm. Then why a possible no? What could go wrong?

"They're also considering Norma, my best friend. She could conceivably get the promotion." "So wouldn't you be happy?" I asked. "Aren't you each other's best friend?" "Yes, we are best of friends, and no, I wouldn't be happy. Because we are best friends, we wouldn't be then." "Would Norma be a bad boss?" "No, she wouldn't be in the same line of staff, so that would not be a problem. Its just I can't stand the thought of something good happening to a friend and not to me." "You mean you'd rather have an unknown outsider or maybe even someone you don't like have good fortune, while Norma and you share lower rank?" "I'm afraid that's what I would rather have. That's how I feel."

Every time a friend succeeded, she died a little but when something good happens to a stranger, that's a remote story as if from another planet. But when something good happens up close, unless it directly benefits us, it threatens us. That's the problem of comparing.

We compare our children if we have children. We compare our talents, our gifts, our ages, our wealth, our upward mobility, our education, our family background, our size of home and much more. We even compare our humility. The moment we think we are humble, we discover·that we are wondering if we are more humble than our neighbor and that we already have some type of reward in the back of our mind.

Out of it all grows envy, and jealousy, or false pride.

The good news is that God does not compare us with one another. Our worth in God's economy does not depend on what we do or don't do in comparison with our friends or our enemies. God does not evaluate us on a pulley system so that when others are up, we are down and when others are down, we are up.

We are here because God wants us to be here. We·did not earn our being here nor can anyone take it away from us. Our worth comes from the fact that we are creatures of God, a part of God's creation, nothing less, nothing more. By the grace of God we are what we are. And as the end of the parable from the Gospel of Luke reminds us — our false comparisons, our false values are turned upside-down by God. For everyone who exalts himself or herself will be humbled and the one who humbles himself or herself will be exalted. Amen.