Sunday, May 3, 1987
LIES WE TELL OURSELVES (No. 1 in a Series: Lies We Tell Ourselves)
Luke 18:9-14

During the season of Lent, just concluded with the celebration of Easter, we did a series of sermons on the theme, “Lies We Tell Each Other.”

In the opening sermon of that series, I noted that most of us like to think of ourselves as truth-telling people. We try to teach our children not to tell lies, but to tell the truth. Our intentions are good, but there’s more to telling the truth than good intentions. We live in a world of lies, and we accept some of these lies and repeat them to each other without most of the time questioning what we are doing. Some of the lies that we tell each other and which we explored in that sermon series were: “More Money Will Make Us Happy,” “Winning Is What Matters,” “It’s Always Been This Way,” and “Our Hero Will Save Us.”

However, there are not only the lies in our culture which we tell each other, but there are also lies which we tell ourselves. And it is some of those lies that we are going to be looking at in this sermon series. To put it another way, we are all masters of self-deception. We all do it. We tell ourselves, for example, that we’ll diet tomorrow or ask for a raise today. When we’re expecting a call from someone and they don’t call, we are quick to make excuses to ourselves for that person. The conviction that our children are all geniuses is a deep-rooted one, as is the belief that we will never make the mistakes our parents made. We deny painful truths — that is, we tell ourselves lies and use fantasy to help deaden the pain. These are all examples of self-deception, and the behavior is as old as humanity.

The Bible is filled with stories of self-deception. In the very first stories in the first book of the Old Testament, in Genesis, Adam tells himself and tells God that it wasn’t his fault that he ate the fruit of the forbidden tree. Eve tells herself that it wasn’t her fault that she did the same. King David lied to himself when he took Bathsheba, another man’s wife. He excused himself by saying that he was the king and above the law. As we shall continue to see in this sermon series, Jesus knew how much each of us is tempted to self-deception.

In the parable from the Gospel of Luke, read a few minutes ago, Jesus illustrates how the Pharisee deceived himself into believing that he was better than others and more valued by God than other people.

Psychologists, philosophers, and writers have offered various definitions of self-deception over the years. Freud introduced the term “defense mechanism.” Others have used such terms as “false consciousness,” or “lies of the mind.” Psychologist C. R. Snyder, principal author of the book entitled Excuses: Masquerades in Search of Grace, offers the following definition of self-deception: “You have two ideas about yourself, one of which is more positive. It is this positive perception of the self that will be more in your consciousness than the negative belief. However, this negative perception is not totally out of your awareness.” In other words, it helps your self-esteem to believe that you did your best possible work on a recent report. In the back of your mind, however, you may recognize that you could have done far better if you had really applied yourself.

Sometimes, of course, some of the little lies we tell ourselves can be helpful if it doesn’t go on too long. They allow a person to reorganize, to pull his or her resources together. We sometimes call this rationalization. For example, when we don’t receive a coveted promotion,

we may tell ourselves it is because of an unfair boss or unfair system and not because of our poor performance. We are anxious to hold onto a positive image of ourselves and in doing so maintain a sense of control over our lives. But on the other hand, if it was our poor performance that kept us from getting the promotion, then if we deceive ourselves too long, we may never get a promotion. We will keep covering up our deficiencies. Thus, it takes courage and talking with someone else to discover what the truth is. It could be that an unfair boss or system kept us from getting the promotion. Self-honesty is a crucial issue for all of us. If we keep deceiving ourselves, we will also deceive others, and we will not be able to have open and healthy relationships. In addition, when we keep deceiving ourselves, we block our relationship with God. And more than anything else, if we keep lying to ourselves in important areas of our lives, we will not be able to make the changes that are necessary for us. Our growth and maturity will be blocked.

Anorexics, bulimics, and alcoholics tend to be experts at denying painful truths, and the results can be tragic. An anorexic will believe that she is always too fat, even when the mirror and scale offer horrifying evidence of her false judgment. A bulimic may repress the knowledge of her binges and purges despite the all-too-visible danger signs. And alcoholics lie to themselves all the time, claiming that they drink just to loosen up or that they always remain in control. Often the families of alcoholics join in the destructive game of self-deception, avoiding the painful truth.

In her new book entitled Betty: A Glad Awakening, Betty Ford describes in detail the lies she kept telling herself, and she also relates how her family members supported her in her lies because they didn't want to face the painful truth either — that she was addicted to prescription drugs and alcohol.

Type A individuals, chronic super-achievers, are also great self-deceivers, according to some recent studies. The very capacity that makes them achievers appears to make them more prone to illness and death. A study at the University of Pittsburgh demonstrated that Type A's will exercise hard and then tune out feelings of fatigue, completely denying that they are tired, despite obvious signs. In the same way, Type A's often fail to recognize early signs of heart trouble and neglect to take care of their bodies accordingly.

Yet some self-deceptive practices may prove physically beneficial. In a study of patients prior to surgery, psychologists Richard S. Lazarus and Frances Cohen of the University of California at Berkeley discovered that those who avoided thinking about the upcoming operation and its possible negative consequences recovered faster than those patients who dwelt on it.

Some kinds of self-deception, in moderation, allow us to become more accepting of human behavior while maintaining a positive self-image and encouraging risk-taking. The key issue is how to distinguish between harmful and helpful self-deception. And that's not always easy to do. We need others to help us because without some outside look at ourselves, we tend to deceive ourselves more intensely.

Again, in her book, Betty Ford describes how she was not able to see her drug and drinking problem and how serious it had become until others who loved and cared for her intervened. And in her case, it took more than family members, although they were included. In her own words, "Some of them saw me more clearly than I saw myself, and all of them loved me until I could love myself."

How then can we as Christians deal with the lies we tell ourselves?

First, we need to admit that we do lie to ourselves. There is not one among us who is immune. We exhibit an amazing agility in avoiding the truth about who we are and what we do. Our failures in being honest with ourselves are instances of self-deception. And all of us are, have been, or could be self-deceivers. We are prone to it, capable of it, and never more likely to be in its grip than in those moments when we are sure we are not.
As people of faith, we are called to be honest in our dealings with God, with others, and with ourselves. Self-deception can disrupt all of those relationships.

As we have seen, harmful self-deception occurs when people who are committed to certain values act against those values while convincing themselves that what they are doing does not, in fact, violate those values. Isn't that what happened with the arms sales to Iran? The disciple Peter, for example, told himself and others that he was strong and would never desert his master. He desired to be a person faithful unto death. Yet he was not that person. He, at that point in his life, valued something else more — his own skin.

Peter, however, was able to overcome his self-deception with the help of others. And in the next chapter of his life, he became a stronger and more faithful follower of Jesus. He had learned the valuable lesson that we can and do lie to ourselves — and that it can and does happen to each one of us.

The second step to dealing with self-deception is to recognize that we need help in overcoming it. We are never able to see our lies to ourselves as clearly as we need to see them. Others can see them more clearly than we can.
In the parable that Jesus told about the Pharisee and the tax collector, Jesus was critical of the Pharisee because he trusted too much in his own righteousness. The Pharisee was too sure that he would never deceive himself. He would never be able to admit to having lied to himself in any way, and thus he would be unwilling to receive any kind of help.

Samuel Johnson once noted the kinds of moves self-deceivers make: They congratulate themselves on a single act of generosity, telling themselves that they are generous people; or they dwell on the faults of others; or they avoid people who know what they are like, preferring the company of those who will not expose them to themselves.

On the other hand, the tax collector that Jesus described in his parable was the kind of person who was willing to admit, first, that he was capable of lying to himself, and second, that he needed help to overcome the lies he had been telling himself. Thus, he was saved. Jesus said to him, "I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

Thus, I invite you to be present for these Sundays in May, as we look more carefully at some of the lies we tell ourselves. Today's sermon was a kind of general introduction to the whole series. Amen.