

Sermon on 1. Corinthians 6, 9-14+18-20, 06.08.2006

The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the Love of God and the Communion of the Holy Spirit be with us all. Amen.

Text:

9)Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither the immoral, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor abusers of themselves with mankind,10) nor thieves, nor the greedy, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor robbers will inherit the kingdom of God. 11)And such were some of you. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. 12)"All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be enslaved by anything. 13)Food is meant for the stomach and the stomach for food" – and God will destroy both one and the other. The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. 14) And God raised the Lord and will also raise us up by his power. 15)Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Shall I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! 16)Do you not know that he who joins himself to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For, as it is written, "The two shall become one."(Genesis 2,24) 17)But he who is united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. 18)Shun immorality. Every other sin which a man commits is outside the body; but the immoral man sins against his own body. 19)Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; 20)you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

Dear Congregation,

I have just returned from camp and am actually still in a kind of "vacation mood", because once again we had a good time at the lake and in nature with these children and young people, and now such a text! It is the proposed sermon text for today, and I have honestly hesitated whether I should use it at all; also, because it is one of the five texts in the Bible, which deal with the topic of homosexual acts in a negative way – a topic which preoccupies the Synod for four years now, and also, in many respects, provides the topic for conversations and provokes people's feelings. Shall I preach about this and risk that congregational members get excited about a matter which actually poses no problem in our congregation, but could thereby become a problem?

But then I have decided to use the text, because through it one can show how easy it would be to take only one aspect of a text and preach whatever one pleases. That, however, is not the task of a preacher. As a Pastor, I have to do justice to the text and not to my opinion, right? For, if you have paid close attention, this is about more than homosexual acts. And it is not simply about homosexuality but about paid sex with children. I do not know anyone with a sound mind, no matter of what orientation, who considers this good. Unfortunately, it is the case that, as a rule, fathers and husbands is the ones who, in a detestable way, take shameless advantage of the poverty of people in Asian countries – where "sex-tourism" booms – and have sex with minors.

It is also about other criminal acts, as terms like thieves and robbers indicate. However, not about them alone. Others are named here in the same breath: the immoral, idolaters, adulterers, greedy, drunkards and revilers. Astonishingly, it does not say here that some are worse than others. No difference is made between these offences. But furthermore, it is said: *11)And such were some of you. Former immorals, idolaters, adulterers, abusers of themselves with mankind, 10) thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers* are the members of the congregation in Corinth!

Recently I have read a report about a German pastor who works in Schleswig Holstein and is a former murderer. As a young adult he pushed his then girlfriend off a cliff, because he wanted to get the life insurance which both had taken out shortly before their wedding. He was caught, the motive was evident. He has spent 16 years in a Scottish prison, during which time he has converted and studied theology. When he was released and had returned to Germany, he asked the church whether he could work as a pastor. Of course, there have been many discussions. However, one was of the opinion that he deserved a second chance. After he could give believable proof that he was a good and responsible pastor, he was given a congregation a few years ago. The parents of the victim have died in the meantime, but the truth about the pastor, that he was a murderer, became publicly known. A brother of the clergyman made known, what had been a secret for decades, because of inheritance disputes. You can perhaps imagine what was happening in the press, in the congregation and in the family of the pastor. His children, who knew nothing of his history, were shocked. His daughter has since tried to take her own life several times. The wife of the pastor has an illness which has worsened due to the stress of publicity. Yet, still, the church leaders stand behind their pastor. During 18 years of serving the church, during many years as emergency pastor, work with disabled persons, liturgy, there was not one single complaint. "Christian faith exists through forgiveness and new beginnings", argues Otto-Uwe Kramer, Provost of the Church in Oldenburg. And the Schleswig Bishop Hans Christian Knuth defends the "surely problematic decision" with the statement "We take the Bible seriously". "Everyone has the right to a second chance", adds the Hamburg Bishop Maria Jepsen. "If a person honestly regrets his wrong doings, he is not to be blamed for his criminal history forever."

How would we have reacted? What would we say if our congregation would be a collection of criminals whose names could be found in the criminal files of the police?

Paul, who wrote this text, was formerly himself responsible for imprisonment and execution of Christians. Perhaps this is the reason that people per se are not being condemned here. Perhaps we also notice that Paul does not select one group or point to a certain group. His list includes issues like greed or immorality or adultery, which, without pause, happen in our society and also in our congregation. But the point is not to simply denounce these people. According to Paul's opinion, there is apparently a possibility to make a new beginning even after a terrible past, to live a new life as part of a community. After all, he himself has experienced this.

For this is how he continues:

But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. All things are lawful for me, but not all things are helpful. All things are lawful for me, but I will not be enslaved by anything. 15)Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? 19)Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; 20)you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

This does not mean that wrongful acts are being approved. However, among other things, it means that there is no difference made in regards to people's need for salvation. Even though someone does things which are not criminal according to the law, like greed, or reviling, one would not go to heaven, if, as Paul says, there were no possibility of redemption, which exists in Christ only, in his death on the cross, into which we are baptized. In this context, you can read chapter 6 of the Letter to the Romans.

Perhaps you now understand that here it is about much more than immorality or such. It is about the fact that generally all people need redemption to be able to lead a pious life. Furthermore, it is not about the guilt of others which I criticize or stigmatize, but it is first of all and always about my own guilt and the question where I myself need redemption, which means, reparation of my guilt.

A further idea is that we are responsible for what we do with ourselves, and that body and spirit are a whole not to be separated from each other, but belong together. Not only what I think, but also, what I do with my body, has an effect on my relationship with God.

It is not only about immorality here, although it seems that this has been the foremost problem of the congregation of Corinth, as one can assume by the lengthy comments on immorality. But rather about the fact that, if I, in regards to my body, live only according to the pleasure principle, I do harm to myself and others.

12) "All things are lawful for me," but not all things are helpful. "All things are lawful for me," but I will not be by anything.

Is it not strange that in a text that is about moral offences, Paul writes such a sentence and foregoes the listing of what one is allowed and what one is not allowed to do? – The reason for this is that during Jesus' time, during Paul's time, and throughout the whole church history until today, all attempts to make rules for people, especially where it concerns the body, has failed. Paul knows, too, that apparently stronger forces are at work here, and every manner of moral lifestyle is connected to insight and not to rules. The sentence "...not all things are helpful", should be a reminder that egoism and selfishness can destroy many things. The criterion for responsible actions, also sexual, is and remains love.

It goes far beyond bodily matters, if one becomes clear on the fact that many things can "enslave" people. There are things that make us dependent. There are things that are of an addictive nature and concern also our body: That can be sex; it can be food, if one simply cannot control when and how much one eats; it can be excessive sports; it can be alcoholism or work addiction; it can be a beauty ideal, which I want to achieve through cosmetic tricks and operations. It also may be the case that I fail to take care of my body altogether and neglect it. Why should I take care of myself, indeed, I am already of a certain age? – Why should I go and see a doctor?

Paul asks us, too, *Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? You are not your own; 20) you were bought with a price...*

Normally, we do take particularly good care of things which are valuable or were expensive. Why not also care for our body, too, which is, indeed, a 'temple', in which the Holy Spirit resides?

The German poet Christian Morgenstern has once said "The body is the translation of the soul into the visible." That gives me personally reason to reflect. It is about a holistic consciousness of our own person, where what one thinks and does with one's body are not two different things. God pays attention to the whole person. And the question remains what we do with our life. Yet, as our text shows, God never writes someone off, even though we do that often. There is a chance for redemption and forgiveness even for *the immoral, idolaters, adulterers, abusers of themselves with mankind, 10) thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers*. That is the good news. Amen.

And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, may keep our hearts and minds in Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.