

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

One of the most bizarre, shocking, and sickening stories of this generation, especially for Lutherans, has to be the account of the life of Dennis Rader, who, at age seventy, is now serving 10 life sentences in solitary confinement in the El Dorado Correction Facility in El Dorado, Kansas.

Dennis Rader lived, and likely is still living, albeit now behind bars, a very compartmentalized existence. By that I mean that certain parts of his life and activity were and likely are clearly and wholly unrelated to the other parts.

For instance, up until his arrest in 2005, Dennis Rader was a leader in his church, and had served as president of his congregation, Christ Lutheran Church, of Wichita, Kansas.

Dennis Rader was employed as a city official, a compliance officer, for Park City, Kansas, and he was a Boy Scout leader, and the father of an Eagle Scout. Those glowing credentials are entirely separate from the dark and ugly side of Dennis Rader which is truly beyond horrific.

Dennis Rader is a convicted serial killer, the self-confessed “BTK” murderer. In letters to media outlets over the course of his crimes, Rader named himself “BTK” after his methods of “bind, torture, and kill.” Between 1974 and 1991, Dennis Rader murdered ten people. Rader thought he could keep the dark and ugly side of his life from touching the rest of his life.

He was wrong – and so was his “compartmentalized thinking,” though it is something that many of us do, often without thinking about it, or at least without thinking very much about it.

Thankfully, there are very few of us who would act out in such bizarre and violent ways as did Dennis Rader, but to compartmentalize our thinking is actually not very rare at all.

There are people who work hard for world peace, but who still allow their broker to invest their funds in armaments companies. There are people who sing in church on Sunday, but who are absolutely ruthless in business dealings on Monday. There are self-proclaimed environmentalists who drive gas-guzzlers and never recycle.

There are parents who preach healthy living to their children, but who practice unhealthy habits themselves. There are Christians who say “God loves everybody,” but who still harbor deep prejudice against people of a different skin color. There are disciples who sing the hymn, “We Give Thee But Thine Own,” but who actually hold more than a few things back.

And then there is the man in our gospel reading today. He’s a fairly familiar character since his story is included in three of the gospels, and all three agree that he was rich. He came to Jesus and asked what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus’ first response was that he should keep the commandments.

The man said he was already doing that, and had done so since his youth. So Jesus then gave him a second response, telling the man that he should sell his possessions, give the money to the poor, and then come and follow Jesus. At that the man went away “shocked” and “grieving,” because he had many possessions and clearly, he was not prepared to part with them.

In effect, Jesus was calling this man to make his whole life of one piece, whereas the man wanted to keep things compartmentalized: religious observance in one room, enjoyment of possessions in another.

When he asked Jesus his question, he expected that Jesus would tell him how to dress up that religious room a bit, maybe even tell him how to remodel it, but he didn't expect Jesus to address the other rooms.

Yet that's what Jesus did. In linking the man's attitude toward his possessions with his spiritual practice, Jesus was telling him to take down the walls between the separate compartments of his life and let his religious devotion touch all of them. The man wasn't prepared to do that, and so he went away grieving.

Likely you recall that Jesus said the great commandment is to "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength." In other words, don't try to stick God in only one compartment of your life.

Compartmentalization is a spiritual problem, but it is also a term used in psychiatry. There it is defined similarly: to take things that are properly related and put them in separate compartments in our minds so that they don't have to rub up against each other and cause us any pain, stress, or tension.

And the man in our gospel story is a classic example of that. He's religious and he is rich, and he has arranged his life so that the two things do not touch. Thus there is no friction between them.

But there is also no spiritual growth taking place in him either, and his religious life remains on such a perfunctory level that he realizes it lacks something. It was that realization that brought him to Jesus in the first place, looking for help.

In psychiatry, the opposite of compartmentalization is "integration," which means to pull the various aspects of our lives together so that we are working from the whole picture. The word integration comes from the noun, "integer," which is a mathematical term for whole numbers (as opposed to fractions).

"Integrity" comes from the same word. The same words can apply to Christianity, too. Jesus was calling this man to integrity, to wholeness, to completeness, to bring the different and maybe separate pieces of his life together in an integrated whole and serve God with his entirety.

We can understand, however, why the man went away feeling sad, because integration is not nearly as comfortable as compartmentalization. When we have to run our conduct and our behavior at work and play and in the privacy of our homes through our spiritual, moral, and faith filters, there's always the chance that something won't pass muster.

That creates internal stress, at least until we resolve the issue by giving Jesus access to the formerly walled-off places. On the other hand, it cannot be said that compartmentalization is without its own pain. Some compartments in our lives develop as a result of wrongdoing, or because of some issue we do not want to face.

We put those matters in a separate room, but this one we lock up and put a "no admittance" sign on the door. If it is wrongdoing that is inside, it may be there because we really don't want to admit to ourselves that it is wrong.

But the very secrecy of the room yields guilt, and guilt can spawn symptoms that can really upset our lives. So on balance, whether speaking of our mental, emotional, or spiritual health, we are better off to tear down all of these compartmental walls.

From time to time, we hear people claim that the church is full of hypocrites, and the people making that claim are usually stating it as an excuse not to go to church themselves. But having spent my whole life around church people, I really believe this claim about the hypocrisy of church people is overstated. Hypocrisy implies intentional deception of others. I am a hypocrite if I am doing selfish or mean-spirited things while pretending to be a righteous person.

Frankly, though, I seldom meet people in churches who impress me as phonies or pretenders. I believe most people who are involved in churches are sincere and trying hard to do the right things. It may be that what people think of as hypocrisy is not that at all, but is compartmentalization.

That can look like hypocrisy if you are not considering the motivation, but it really isn't the same thing. A lot of compartmentalization takes place without our intending it, but the result is that some aspect of our life gets left outside of our faith.

I can imagine that someone who didn't take the time to understand this man in today's Gospel who came to Jesus might conclude that he was a hypocrite. Here he was, saying that he had carefully obeyed the commandments since his youth while at the same time he was not sharing his wealth with the poor. How hypocritical that might look!

But I believe he wasn't being hypocritical, and one reason we know that is because the Bible tells us that when the man indicated that he had kept the commandments, Jesus, "looking at him, loved him."

Love may not have been Jesus' first reaction to those he accused of hypocrisy – like the scribes and Pharisees. Yes, Jesus loved everybody, but on the occasions where the scribes and Pharisees were behaving hypocritically, Jesus minced no words in confronting their pretense and labeling their behavior for what it was.

But this young man evoked a loving response from Jesus, so he was not being a hypocrite; he had simply compartmentalized his life. Thus we can conclude that generally, compartmentalization is not something that comes from devious motives, but from a failure to integrate all the aspects of our lives under the direction of our faith and our trust in Jesus Christ.

Some time ago, I read about a public figure who was making a speech in which he was addressing the subjects of natural resources conservation and the environment. But then he began to talk about religion and morality, and, as a transitional statement, he said, "I now call upon the Christian part of myself ...." Say what?

I don't question the man's sincerity, but he certainly had some compartmentalization going on, and he had misunderstood Christianity. Committing ourselves to Jesus means that we don't divide ourselves into Christian and non-Christian parts.

But if, upon looking at our lives, we decide that we have attempted to do that, then this is an opportunity for spiritual growth, for tearing down the walls between the compartments, and letting Jesus into every square inch of our lives. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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