

*Sermon for the Third Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 5.vi.2005, 9:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
Hosea 5:15-6:6; Psalm 50:7-15; Romans 4:13-25; Matthew 9:9-13,18-26
Holy Baptism of Ethen Charles Shaffer
Holy Communion, WOV - Setting 5*

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who was and
Who is to come! Amen.

***For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice,
the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.
-- Hosea 6:6***

***Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving
and make good your vows to the Most High.
-- Psalm 50:14***

***And as He sat at dinner in the house, many
tax collectors and sinners came and were
sitting with Him and His disciples. When the Pharisees
saw this, they said to His disciples, "Why does your
teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" But when
He heard this, He said, "Those who are well have no
need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and
learn what this means, 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.'
For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners."
-- Matthew 9:10-13***

Those who were known collectively as 'tax collectors' in Roman Palestine would have included the whole gamut of civilian administrators, everyone the Romans used to govern this extremely unruly province. Some would have administered the road system, recruiting labor or collecting tolls for those who used the roads Rome had built. Others would have worked in the administration of the system of water and sewerage, working on or administering the

vast viaduct system built by the Roman army corps of engineers, a system which still functions well in many parts of the world. Others would indeed have worked directly with the collection of taxes, many of them maximizing their own profits by raising the service cost or tax preparation fee they charged their countrymen. But, in the eyes of most of the occupied people of that occupied country, *all* those civilian workers, Jews just like their family members and neighbors, would have been look down upon as collaborators with the Romans, about as popular in some quarters as civilian and military members of the free Iraqi government are with the diehard resistance there today.

For that reason, these so-called 'tax collectors' came, as a rule, *not* from the center of respectable Jewish society but from its unrespectable periphery, from those known as the *anawim*, those outside the Law of God. The line separating the *hassidim* from the *anawim*, the 'righteous' from those 'cast off' or 'outside' the Law of God was a line no conventionally religious Jew of that time and place would have wanted to cross. In calling Matthew the 'tax collector' to be one of His Disciples, in eating under Matthew's roof, at Matthew's

table and side with other members of that community of 'tax collectors' and other outcasts, Jesus crosses that line, one of the things for which He will be killed, one giant step toward the Cross, but also a step closer toward the glory of the Father.

Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God from Whom the Spirit of the Father also proceeds, is *constantly* crossing that line, *constantly* leading His Church forward, *across* that line which separates the righteous from the outcast, constantly leading us *forward*, toward the Cross, toward the glory of God in this world. Christ Our Savior leads us across that line today, this hour, when He gives His Name and the Name of His Father and of His Holy Spirit to a child whose story has yet to be written. There are some edited and abridged versions of Christianity which would not want the Triune God to take that risk and would not allow it in their church order, communities that would insist instead on seeing whether this child would grow into a pious young man before allowing him to be bathed in the waters of Holy Baptism. We do not know today, what kind of a young man Ethen Charles Shaffer will turn out to be, and the verdict is still out on his sisters, Kelsey and Madison, too! I would say, knowing the

family these three come from, that they will be so surrounded by faith, hope and love every day of their growing lives that there would seem to be little doubt of a very godly outcome. I pray that I get to find out for myself. But we never know, do we? By the time Ethen is old enough to be confirmed in the faith of his Baptism, at age fourteen or fifteen, he *may* be habitually raising his heart and mind to God in prayer and in righteous service, or he may be just raising *cane*. More than likely, he will be doing some of both. But what we do know is that, if there is a line that needs to be crossed to bridge any gap of wrath or despair that may threaten to separate Ethen from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus Our Lord, that line will be crossed by God's grace and God's Holy Church! Ethen will be called, as he is called today, to the forgiveness of sins, new life and salvation by this Word God speaks today of which we are witnesses.

This is a risk for God, the crossing of a line for God, but it is not really much of a risk for us as a Lutheran congregation, because, everybody knows, that's what those Lutherans, along with about 90% of all Christians do. We don't let children grow up in doubt about whether God loves and accepts them before inviting God to declare

them His very own. But, wherever we *do* leave people in doubt about that, and particularly where it may actually *cost* us something to correct that situation, *there* we may hear Jesus calling us beyond conventional spirituality and business as usual religiosity to reach out to the *anawim* around us and among us and, if necessary, like Jesus Himself, to become one of the outcasts of Church or society ourselves.

While driving up South George Street in York, I saw an unexpected example of this. It was on the sign of the Unitarian-Universalist Church of York. On that sign, I believe under the word 'Church,' which means, keep in mind, 'assembly' in Greek, there was a very small but still very visible *pink triangle*. Now, probably you are aware of the meaning of that symbol, but just in case you aren't, I'll point out that that was the symbol sewn onto the uniforms of Nazi concentration camp inmates to indicate that their crime was that of homosexuality. The Nazis also required most Christian clergy imprisoned in these camps to wear the pink triangle on the supposition that it would cause the other inmates to abuse them and what a good joke that would be. The pink triangle thus became,

together with the yellow Star of David, the Nazi symbol for the lowest of the low, for those 'sub-humans' who were not worthy to live. For the last sixty years, since the end of World War II, men and women who understand themselves to be homosexual have used the pink triangle as a badge of honor, of remembrance and of defiance toward those who share the Nazi world view.

There, on that church sign, it stands as a sign of *welcome*, a welcome to the fellowship and the Altar of Christ which is already the stated policy of our own Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. And yet, as I drove on past Saint Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, past Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church and, in my mind, past this dear place, I asked myself what act of love, of spiritual strength and of sheer courage it would take for *any* of our congregations of what is the largest Christian denomination in South Central Pennsylvania to post that tiny symbol publicly, to welcome explicitly those who belong to a group among us which many either pretend does not exist or would like to see simply vanish, by whatever means. What would it take to follow Christ across *that* line? The thought alone causes my heart to sink, while many inside

and outside our congregations are left to wonder if the Church still remembers their Baptism, their adoption as daughters and sons of God through Jesus Christ, now that their lives bear a stigma they cannot remove. Lord, have mercy upon us!

Our Church, that is, the family of Lutheran Christianity to which we belong and which we love, stands before a question that requires us to confront our own fear of being with Jesus and with those with whom He has table fellowship. Oh, we talk as if the policy on Ordination or the question the Church's blessing of legal same-sex unions are the real questions confronting the ELCA. We speak in public as though that other, more basic and much more troubling question had been settled. That is the question of openly offering the sign of peace, the right hand of fellowship and belonging in the congregation to those who were once forced to wear the pink triangle. It is the question of accepting the peace of Christ and the love and acceptance of the Christian community *from* 'them,' lay people as well as clergy. It is the question of laying to rest this latest variation on the age-old idea of 'them' and 'us.' That question has *not* been resolved, not here and not in very many places in our

American Lutheran family, and that is the real question whereby the living God questions us.

The Church has crossed *many* a line by faith from which fear would have held her back. There was to begin with the line separating Jews from Gentiles, slaves from free, men from women. There followed other lines to be crossed, lines of language, lines of geography, lines of nationality and of race, lines of class and, most forbidding of all, those lines that run right down the middle of our minds, separating us in our very thoughts and feelings one from another. Still the Church goes forward, held by the hand by her Lord, sometimes dragged forward by the Lord of history, more by the hair than by the hand, but forward still, always toward the Cross and the everlasting glory of the Father. ✎Amen.

Now to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✎Amen.

S. D. G. !