

*Sermon for the Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 4.ix.2005, 9:00 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Chanceford Twp., York Co.,
Pennsylvania
Holy Communion liturgy, WOV Setting 2
Ezekiel 33:7-11; Psalm 9:33-40; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20*

J. J. !

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

*“ . . . let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a
tax collector.”*

--Matthew 18:15-20

I have heard some complaints about the excessive brevity of
my sermons lately. I will try not to disappoint you in that
manner today.

This started out as one of those weeks when I
thought I could see both world events and the Church's
calendar lining up in a configuration that made me look
forward to the process of preparing this sermon. That was
until I looked at the Gospel text for today and the First
Reading from Ezekiel that supports it. At just that time in
which our nation is experiencing what will probably prove to

be the greatest natural catastrophe in American history, and approaching the very day in the Lutheran calendar on which Albert Schweitzer is commemorated, I, and every other pastor and commissioned preacher in this church is called by the Lectionary to preach on what?!— *Church discipline!* The ‘Office of the Keys,’ as it was called in older editions of the Catechism, something those older editions defined as “that peculiar office which Christ gave His Church”

‘Peculiar’ indeed! We are faced with images of human suffering unparalleled on American soil since the Civil War and the genocide of the Native Americans, and we Lutherans are talking about excommunicating members who either give public scandal through their public sins or prove themselves time and again to be such stinkers that they threaten the peace, cohesion and mission of the congregation. We have the opportunity to focus on the incredible life of an incredible Christian, Albert Schweitzer—

someone we could surely use in a place of responsibility in the rescue, relief and recovery effort today!—but, no, we have to talk about the ‘peculiar office’ of not only losing but binding peoples’ sins and orneriness.

I stand before you with *three* sermons in my mind and heart this morning, but, alas, I will only be allowed to preach one.

I pouted about this while procrastinating in my sermon preparation, taking time out for a few Holy Communion visits, a little light came on way up in the attic of my mind, a thought I *thought* I could *never* forget, having learned it more than once the hard way. *The whole purpose of Church discipline is so that the Church can be free for mission, free to address the challenges of the day—like Hurricane Katrina—and free to commemorate the blessings of the past—such as Albert Schweitzer—and free to hear God’s Word and to contemplate the mystery of the Triune God.*

For, when there is nothing but trouble, division, suspicion, bitterness, rancor and revenge in the Church, *not much that pleases God gets done!*

So, let's talk do about Church discipline. Let's talk about it the way the Early Church remembered Jesus Himself had talked about it, the way our own Constitution outlines it. Evidently, Our Lord thought that there just might be trouble, dissension, division, scandal and all the rest in the Church, even if She was called to be the Bride of Christ, as Saint Paul and Saint John the Divine describe Her, even if She was founded on the rock solid basis of faith, God's own gift.

There is talk about that sort of trouble *throughout* the New Testament, in all of the Letters of Saint Paul, except Philippians and Philemon, in First Peter, here, there and everywhere, very imperfect people *being* very imperfect while claiming holiness as their calling, people causing scandal, people dividing Christian communities out of pride

or just for the fun of stirring things up. Yes, that has been someone's idea of fun down through the Christian centuries. I am assured by a friend of mine in the Rabbinate that Christians do not have a corner on that particular market. Cold comfort, that.

According to what Jesus has to say in today's Gospel, the Church is *not powerless* in the face of this. Far from it! The Church, if She acts in love toward the problem Christian, first quietly, then with a witness, then with more witnesses if necessary and finally, *excommunication* as the last failure of Christian community—but *for the sake of* Christian community!—has Heaven on Her side.

Of course, the New Testament world, and the world of Saint Matthew's community, was a world in which there was, at first, only *one* Church in *one* place. It wasn't as if a trouble-making Early Christian who was excommunicated from her or his congregation or clearly headed in that

direction could just trot down the road and take up with the Methodists, or the Presbyterians as they might today! *Excommunication*—hideous word!—meant you were *out*, outside the Church and its ministry for a time, separated also from the Sacraments, for a season usually, for your own good and that of the Church, or sometimes forever if you so chose. I suppose the earliest example of this, for those who think that *Jesus* would surely not want to exclude anyone, is the overturning of the tables of the moneychangers in the Temple by *Jesus*, Who found their enterprise incompatible with the purpose of the Temple to be “a house of prayer for all nations.” The Temple then, just as the Church now, was ‘for every-*one*, but not for every-*thing*,’ to coin a phrase.

“Truly I tell you,” Our Lord said to the Disciples, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” A later generation of ordained Church leaders would take this

to mean that heaven had given them a blank check Heaven had to honor to exclude anyone for any reason they saw fit. *Not so!* The Greek language can be so precise in some ways, but it is very slippery when it comes to some verb forms. Most interpreters of this text know, or ought to, that we could just as well translate Matthew 18:18 as “. . . whatever you bind on earth *will have been bound* in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth *will have been loosed* in heaven.” Or, as Our Lord teaches us to pray in the prayer He gave us, speaking of and to His Heavenly Father and Ours, “*Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.*”

I take this to mean that Pastors and Congregation Councils had better be *very* careful about whom they exclude, and that that exclusion, that excommunication had better be on account of behavior or attitudes that have absolutely no place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

And, just before He speaks about binding and loosing, Our Lord tosses in one of those delayed action thought bombs of His for His hearers to take on the road with them: “. . . let such a one be to you as *a Gentile* and a *tax collector*.” Yessirree! *Pfui!* on those yucky, uncircumcised, unclean *Gentiles*, and on those disloyal, irreligious, dishonest Roman-collaborating *tax collectors too!* Matthew’s community was undoubtedly a completely *Jewish* Christian community in which neither Gentiles nor those who worked for the Romans were particularly welcome.

But, wait a minute! Wasn’t *Matthew* once a tax collector? And didn’t *Jesus* stop to heal and talk to Gentiles of all kinds, even *a Roman Centurion*? Yes, indeed! Jesus loved both tax collectors, like Matthew and Zacchaeus, *and* Gentiles. And *that* is the way Church discipline is to be exercised when it must be, as the Constitution of our Church clearly outlines in the very words of today’s Gospel. i.e., with

humility, with fairness and with love. May it never be necessary here, but thanks be to God wherever and whenever the Church has to say firmly and clearly, 'The Church is for every-*one*, but not for every-*thing*, and this, our dear Christian sister or brother, applies sadly to *you, and to us all!*' 📧 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 our God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, both now and forever. 📧 Amen.

S. D. G. !