

*Sermon for the Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 25.ix.2005, 10:30 a.m.
Evangelical Lutheran Church of Saint James the Apostle / Chanceford Twp., York Co.,
Pennsylvania
Ante-Communion Liturgy, LBW Setting 2
Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32; Psalm 25:1-8; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32*

J. J. !

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



If you have ever wondered how I go about selecting a focus
verse for the Sunday sermon, usually from the assigned
Gospel text, the process goes something like this. I try *to*
focus on a single verse, because that is about all I can manage
to remember throughout the coming week. Do you
remember the focus verse from last Sunday's sermon? It was
"The last will be first and the first last" (Matthew 20:16). I
try *not* to select a verse that allows me to grind my favorite
axe or rife my favorite hobby horse. I try *to* focus on a verse

that seems to summarize or epitomize the whole Gospel lesson and the Biblical theme for the day. I try *not* to focus on a verse that seems to be part of the explanation of the Gospel narrative, probably or sometimes most certainly added by one of the Evangelist-editors of the story of Jesus. I try *to* focus on a text that seems close to the very words and teaching of Jesus, a verse that either gives comfort, hope and joy in the face of despair ('gospel' in the Lutheran sense of the word) or a verse that disturbs me deeply by calling my faith and life into question ('law' in the Lutheran sense). The following verse, from the second part of verse 31 of the 21st Chapter of Matthew's Gospel does both:

"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are going into the Kingdom of God ahead of you."

--Matthew 21:31b

As we might say here in South-Central Pennsylvania, *'Well, THAT'S not very nice!'* No, it *wasn't* for those who first heard Jesus say it, and no, it *isn't* for us

church folk today. What in the world does Our Lord mean by making this terrible statement? How is this supposed to help His hearers get the point of the parable of the disobedient son who obeyed his father and the obedient son who didn't? This is really some incentive to lead an honest, holy and chaste life, isn't it?! If tax collectors and prostitutes are entering the Kingdom of God ahead of *me*, then why don't I just become one of *them*? Well, for one thing, I don't have a degree in accounting.

What kind of a community is this Church of Jesus Christ, friend of tax collectors and prostitutes, anyway? I read in the *Delta Star* this week of a Church of the Nazarene missionary to, of all places, *France*, who commented that 80% of the French people consider themselves Christian *but* that less than a couple percent of those claim to have what the missionary called "a personal relationship with Jesus Christ." The Christians of France,

still referred to at Rome as 'the First Daughter of the Church,' have suffered ancient barbarian pagan persecution, the persecution of one another in the French Wars of Religion, modern pagan persecution under the French Revolution, less than benign indifference under the French Republic, not to mention the demoralization of being a colonial power and foreign occupation by modern barbarians so that, to me, it is a *miracle* that faith in God and in Jesus Christ is still to be found on French soil *at all*. *But*, that is not good enough for some. Some consider all that of no account and deduce from the French—and general European—reluctance to speak glibly with a foreigner about their 'personal' relationship with God, that they *have* no such relationship.

I think that that is because some Christians worship *their idea of Christianity and the Christian faith* instead of the One Who calls corrupt tax farmers and streetwalkers to

receive God's forgiveness and to become part of what God is doing in this world. No, characters like Irma la Deuce and her sisters—including, perhaps, *Mary Magdalene*--may not quite fit our idea of a church member or church-goer, but then neither would a lapsed Christian profiteer like Oscar Schindler, who would have been the last to describe himself as devout and who yet spent most of his ill-gotten fortune and risked his life and that of his family to rescue those condemned Jewish men, women and children he employed as a manufacturing contractor during World War II. It seems to matter little to Christ Our Savior and Christ Our Judge whether one *claims* to have a 'personal relationship with Him' or to belong to God's Kingdom in this world and the next. What does *clearly* matter, according to today's Gospel, is your willingness and mine to hear His voice calling us, as we truly are, and our willingness to be gathered into His Church, His 'Assembly,'

with *all* sorts and conditions of people, as *they* really are. If we accept that call of the Holy Spirit to the *unholy*, to *us*, if we accept that call of Christ to *all*, whether they seem to be holy or not, then today's Gospel *is* 'gospel,' good news of joy, consolation, forgiveness and hope, also for *us!*

And if not? Then--do you not hear today's Gospel clearly telling you?—it is time for us to get off our Puritan 'high horse' that presumes to distinguish between Christians on the basis of some preconceived and narrow notion of what a Christian is, does and does not do, a condescending attitude that delights in reducing the statistics of 'authentic Christians' in the world by applying a holiness test that the Scripture either does not demand or the one making such judgments does not live up to.

Now, *Lutherans* are not supposed to be riding Puritan high horses in the first place. We are supposed to *walk* in the dirt and dust of life's hard pathway where real

men and women live, to walk that way as Jesus walked it, as He still calls us to walk it in His footsteps of understanding, compassion and mercy. But, we earthy and unpretentious Lutherans are as much prone as anyone to pick up habits from our neighbors, and we quickly learn that it is easier to ride above the grime and roughness of the road than to walk on it, leaving the rest of the pedestrians for whom Christ died to eat our dust. An authentically Lutheran congregation should include pedestrians only, people who own their own brokenness, who rejoice in Christ's all-inclusive call, and who hold out a helping hand to others in joy and thanksgiving for God's acceptance of *them as they have been, as they are* and in hope in the person God's grace can and might well help them to become before their time in this life is up.

To illustrate the difference, it is helpful to look beyond the religious boundaries of the Church to two

different approaches to a major social and health problem. The problem is habitual drunkenness. Though the Psalmist recounts how the LORD gives us wine “to gladden the heart of man,” people have recognized for centuries that the imbibing of fermented and distilled beverages *can* spell trouble. In times and places in which nearly the only safe thing to drink was either distilled or fermented—and that would include Puritan England and New England—there seemed little that could be done except to counsel moderation. The *modern* Puritan approach—symbolized by the bottle, keg and saloon-smashing axe of ‘Carrie Nation’ and exemplified by the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and the Prohibition Laws—was to attack and eliminate the temptation and to humiliate those who still sought it out. The skid row drunk was and still is made to take the temperance pledge and to sing a hymn for his supper. The more ‘Lutheran’ approach, though it

was first developed by Episcopalians and Roman Catholics, is that of Alcoholics Anonymous. Pointing clearly toward the alcoholic's need for grace and the transforming power of God, the starting point for AA is for each member to acknowledge not only that she or he *had* a problem a problem with strong drink, but each member of the chapter *is* and will be an alcoholic for the rest of their lives, it is hoped an alcoholic in recovery, living in sobriety and being there for others in their struggle with the same demon, but an alcoholic nonetheless. Substitute 'sinner' for 'alcoholic,' and 'forgiveness and sanctification' for 'recovery and sobriety,' and I cannot think of a better definition for the Church—a community of forgiven sinners sanctified through Christ's continual call and encouraging one another on the way of self-respect, divine love and compassion.

This 'non-religious' interpretation of Christianity, as it has been called (D. Bonhoeffer) *confuses* some people, even some Christians. This idea of the Church particularly confuses some *Muslims*. I remember distinctly the look of disbelief on the face of one of my very best students, a young pre-medical student from Pakistan, when I defined the Christian Church as "a community of sinners." "Dr. Carter, Allah—may peace be upon Him!—does not want us to be sinners!" "True," I answered, "but Christians believe, and I believe, that God calls us as we are, and we *are* sinners." Once, while he was still the 1920s prince of the American Protestant pulpit at the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, the Rev. Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick was greeted before worship by a prominent citizen out for a Sunday morning stroll. "I would *love* to hear you preach, Doctor, but the Church is so full of hypocrites!" "Well, then, come on in," Fosdick

replied with a twinkle in his eye and his well-known lightning repartée, “there’s always room for one more!” Presumably Dr. Fosdick included himself in that number.

The Lord only knows, and so do I to a very limited and incomplete extent, how much brokenness, pain, anger, bitterness and manifest imperfection many of us in this congregation bear within our hearts and minds as we answer the Holy Spirit’s call to assemble and to serve in Jesus’ name. Today’s Gospel reminds us that this is the normal state of the Kingdom of God, that Christ is calling us to belong to and to serve God just *as* the people we *are*, not as the people we wish we were or the people we would like others to think we are. Today’s Gospel also reminds our congregation, as we pray for this congregation to grow in numbers of believers, in breadth that will include *all* whom Jesus calls, and in depth of faith active in love, that we *dare* not to be shy in our invitation to

others, for Jesus is not at all shy in calling *us!* Thank you,
Lord Jesus Christ, for honoring us by calling us with all
those for whom You have shed Your innocent blood! ✍

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. !