

Sermon for the Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Year C
09.ix.2007, 10:00 ELW Service of the Word
Deuteronomy 30:15-20; Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33
Saint James the Apostle Evangelical Lutheran Church / Brogue, Pennsylvania

J. J. !

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

**“So therefore, none of you can become my disciple if
you do not give up *all* of your possessions.”**

--Luke 14:33

Our LORD’s parable of the king who considered whether to wage war or sue for peace before going out to do battle with a more powerful adversary might well inform debate on the floor of Congress these days. One may wish in any case that those who tout their evangelical faith so much and who plunged us into total war with the so-called ‘forces of evil’—and not just so-called, because evil they are indeed!—had been a good deal more diligent in their study of the sacred text, especially this one. It is truly amazing what

wisdom can be gained from the Bible if one but bothers to read it.

The LORD Jesus Christ wants to equip and prepare His people, both Israel and the Church, for a struggle more gargantuan than that facing any earthly ruler, state or nation. The struggle for the Kingdom of God, the struggle to follow in the way of the only One Who can lead us to victory in that struggle, is the way of the Cross. To achieve victory, *all* resources with which we are blessed are required, ‘*everything* we possess,’ Our LORD says, and he clearly *means* what He says.

Right about now, you may be expecting this sermon to take a sharp turn toward ‘stewardship.’ And, why not, as long as we understand by ‘stewardship’ something very much more radical than proportionate, sacrificial and dependable financial giving (so that we might finally be

able to pay bills, salaries and meet other obligations in our tightly run ship of a little country church???)? No, with today's Gospel we step out of the baby pool of church giving and planning—which we *will* take care of responsibly if we even moderately grateful to God for the blessings of life and faith, and if we give a fig about the Church at all!—and we step now into the deep, blue sea of the grace of God, *off* the deep end of discipleship if we take today's Gospel seriously.

The New Testament provides precious few guidelines for how much a follower of Jesus is to 'give up,' whether to others in need or for the Church. There is the Apostle Paul's advice regarding the collection for the Church at Jerusalem in II Corinthians 9:7: "Everyone should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful

giver.” And there is Saint Luke’s probably idealized portrait of how the earliest Christians in that Jerusalem community handled their wealth in the days after Pentecost as recorded in Acts 2:44: “All the believers were together and had *everything* in common.” That is closer to our text, which calls us to consecrate *everything* we have to God’s cause and Kingdom in this world and the next. Those who look to the Israelite tithe, the ten percent of all produce, income and any other liquid assets that went into the Temple treasury for the maintenance of the Temple and the priesthood but also for the welfare and defense of the nation, should find no comfort, because the calling of Christ operates on a different mathematics and physics than we are used to. In the Kingdom of Heaven, 10% of *everything* still adds up to *everything*, everything we *have*,

everything we *are* and can *become* in the image of God, in Christ.

But, we may think to ourselves, ‘Surely Christ could not mean ‘everything’ in our lives, *all* we possess, all that we *enjoy* is to be given up? *Surely* there are areas of our life that do not belong to God, things we do that are none of God’s business?’ Surely there are *not!* Let us consider today what might be called the ‘stewardship of the mouth.’

Take, for example, the power of speech, the power to communicate by word of mouth, by written word, by body language, by facial expression, with a nod or a laugh, with a gasp or a guffaw or a clucking of our tongues. Take for example the delectable pastime of so many, *gossip*, and that which gives gossip its exciting flavor, the *lie*.

Those who gossip habitually do so like machines, whether well-maintained or creaky and squeaky, and they will probably go on doing so in eternity, as C. S. Lewis once commented. The habitual gossip, who is quite often an outwardly religious person, has probably forgotten what made gossip so exciting, so very delicious and irresistible in the beginning. Was it because appearing to be ‘in the know’ gave the gossip power and prestige? Probably so, but they have long since forgotten, and, just as an athlete well practiced at his sport no longer thinks back to the rudiments of movement involved, so too do the gossip’s mind and mouth operate together like a well-oiled machine with an automatic transmission. Naturally receptive to new tales, whether based on facts or on lies—Who knows? Who *cares*?!—the mind of the gossip, opening outward toward others of its kind through the ear, belches forth its

processed factoids laced with lies like a meat-grinder, churning on and on, lacking any sense of what harm may come of this relentless activity, and utterly oblivious to the fact that he or she, too, is directly responsible before Almighty God for *every single word*.

Icons in the ancient Christian style depict the Word of God being sent by the Holy Spirit into the ear of Prophet after Prophet of Israel, until that one precious daughter of Israel, who also listened to God's Word, conceived and gave birth to it as her own Son, God's Word incarnate in the fullness of time. And, just as the Blessed Virgin Mary is depicted with the Holy Spirit aiming at her *ear*, her primeval counterpart, Eve, is shown *listening*, but not to God.

Eve listens instead to one who cleverly contradicts the Word of God, to a pretty creature who assures her that, surely, the Creator did not really mean that she and her husband should refrain from eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. ‘Well, that’s not what *I* heard!’ says the serpent in essence, Satan, the first gossip, the ‘father of lies.’ Try as we might to track down the source of a rumor, a bit of gossip, or an outright lie, sometimes the trail leads nowhere, for all lies have their beginning in that great pathetic void where love and light and service of truth should have been, in that angel fallen from heaven through his own self-delusion.

But all those who *repeat* the lie, any lie at all, *serve* its evil nothingness, giving far more than their ears and tongues up to its power, living in bondage to evil. If the

gossip is *caught* serving the lie, as sometimes happens, that can be a blessing, though rare would be the practiced liar who sees it as such. ‘A liar must have a good memory,’ the old German proverb says, and the same applies to the gossip. Either the truth and those who love it will catch up with the liar, who forgot to add this or that key element to his tale so as to make it convincing, or madness, quiet or otherwise, will gradually cloud the mind that can no longer distinguish between truth and falsehood, between darkness and light.

The One Who calls us to freedom from that bondage calls us also to give up all we think we possess apart from Him and His Kingdom, including the sovereignty we presume to have over our use of speech, as though God were not looking. But how can we possibly

accept that call, through all the tangled web of lies and half-truths our mouths and minds and hearts have served over the course of a lifetime? Only by His grace and by the same power that rolled the stone of death away from an empty tomb—that is how and that is the way to freedom!

✠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, now and forever! ✠ Amen.

S. D. G. !