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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 22C)

October 2, 2016

Text: Luke 17:1–10

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

The gospel readings over the past several weeks have focused our attention on the Lord's teaching about our earthly possessions. All that we have is a good gift of God. But it's so easy to allow the gifts to become more important than the Giver of the gifts. Today's reading from Luke 17 comes immediately after last week's parable about a rich man and the beggar, Lazarus. The rich man feared, loved, and trusted in his earthly possessions more than God and he did not love his neighbor, Lazarus, as himself. Lazarus by contrast, loved God, trusted in Him, and seems to have loved his neighbors as much as he could in the midst of his extreme poverty.

We Christian disciples must not only beware of the many sins of covetousness and discontentment, but we must also be prepared to deal with the ugliness of sin; not just in our own lives, but within the Christian congregation, the community of saints who are baptized and redeemed by the blood of Jesus. Notice who Jesus is talking to in vs. 1, "His disciples." That certainly includes the apostles but also other followers of our Lord. Pastors and congregational members must know that sin will manifest its hideous head in the Church. Today's reading prepares us for how to deal with it properly and in a God-pleasing way.

Let's continue with vs. 1–2, "Temptations to sin are sure to come, but woe to the one through whom they come! It would be better for him if a millstone were hung around his neck and he were cast into the sea than that he should cause one of these little ones to sin." First, the Lord Jesus says temptations will come. Sin will manifest itself in the lives of Christians and in Christ's Church. We need to come to terms with this fact. The Church is made up of sinners who succumb to sin. We make bad, terrible, sinful mistakes. Jesus isn't excusing it. It's the reality of living by faith in this fallen creation.

So when critics of the Church say the Church is full of hypocrites, you might surprise them by saying, "You're right. The Christian Church is full of sinners, including the one talking to you. But the difference is we are sinners who are forgiven because of

God's love and Christ. And we are striving, under God's grace, to turn away from those sins. But on this side of eternity, there will always be sins, failure, mistakes, and hypocrisy. Jesus Himself says this. So, why don't you come and join us. There's always room for more forgiven sinners!"

Second, Jesus says if your teachings or your day to day life causes another believer to stumble, it would be better if you cast yourself in the sea with a millstone tied around your neck (vs. 2)!! That's how serious sin, hypocrisy and false teaching are to Jesus. If our doctrine and life causes another disciple to stop confessing that Jesus is Lord and Savior, there will be a fearful reckoning before our Lord on the Last Day. What we teach and how we live is that important.

"Pay attention to yourselves," Jesus says (vs. 3). It could just as easily be translated, "Beware for yourselves." Beware! Take heed! Pay attention! Don't be offended by sin in the Church and don't become the cause for someone to fall away from Jesus. Pastors especially must be mindful of our Lord's warning here. Scripture teaches that pastors will be held to a stricter accountability for the doctrine they teach and for the life they live. The harm caused by pastors who abuse their congregations with false doctrine or with an immoral lifestyle is devastating.

That leads us to the third point in this reading, how sin is dealt with in the Church. The first point was that sin is a reality in the Church. The second was a stern warning not to cause offense another to fall away from the faith because of false teaching and/or immoral living. Now the third point. How to deal with sin when it happens.

Vs. 3-4, "If your brother sins, rebuke him, and if he repents, forgive him, and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him" (vs. 3-4). When we see our Christian brother or sister fall into some sin, our Lord commands us to rebuke them and call them to repentance. But who wants to do that? Isn't it much easier to let them live their life and I'll live mine? Live and let live, we say. But such an attitude towards our fellow Christian is unacceptable. Eternal salvation is at stake.

Now it must be said that the goal in calling our fellow Christian to repentance isn't to be a busybody or a goody-two-shoes. Rather, our intention is to pursue love and forgiveness. So when our brother or sister repents, we forgive quickly and joyously. The 4th petition of the Lord's Prayer rings out with perfect clarity here, "And forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us."

And that leads to the fourth and greatest characteristic of the Church: an eager willingness to forgive early and often. If a brother sins against you seven times a day and he repents, you forgive him seven times. Now that grates against us. Families and friendships have fallen apart because of one or two sins committed over a period of a few days or months. But Jesus says forgive as often as you're asked if even it's seven times in one day. No caveats. No exacting punishment or revenge first and then forgiving. No throwing it back into their face later. You forgive every single time you're asked.

In Luke 17:1–4, four characteristics of the Church have been discussed: 1) sin is a reality in the Church, 2) avoid causing other disciples to fall away from the faith, 3) Christians rebuke each other when there is sin, 4) Christians forgive each other quickly and joyfully when they sin. Is it any wonder the apostles ask Jesus “Increase our faith” in verse 5?

Jesus' response sounds somewhat strange at first hearing. He says, “If you had faith like a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, ‘Be uprooted and planted in the sea,’ and it would obey you” (vs. 6). Faith in Jesus is the lynchpin, the key to the Church's life and Christian discipleship.

Faith is often misunderstood. Sometimes we Christians fall into the mistaken notion that faith itself is some kind of virtue or power or action. Biblical faith never looks to itself. It always has a specific object it looks to, in this case, Jesus. We should never really say, “I have my faith.” It would be better to say, “I have a Savior, Jesus, who has promised me life, forgiveness, and eternal salvation. I have faith in Jesus!” The reason why a Christian can cast a mulberry tree in to the sea is Jesus.

By the way, which do you think is harder? Uprooting trees or forgiving sins? The Bible teaches that when sins are forgiven, they are cast away into the sea (Micah 7:19), never to be fished out again! Forgiveness of sins is the hallmark characteristic of the Christian Church and each Christian disciple.

We know that sin will manifest itself in our lives in the life of the Christian Church. Through faith in Jesus, however, we can do the hard and unpleasant work of rebuking sins because we believe that Jesus died for those sins. He rose from the dead to set us free from sin's power and domination. With that rock-solid promise, we quickly, eagerly, and joyfully forgive the repentant brother or sister. We rejoice with them because we too know what it's like to be forgiven.

The Church is energized by faith in Jesus. That being the case, Jesus then gives us the fifth and final characteristic of His Church in vs. 7–10. It's faithfulness. We are like the servant who goes about the task of caring for the master. We don't expect preferential treatment. At the end of each day, we say, "We are unworthy servants; we have only done what was our duty" (vs. 10).

The amazing thing is, however, the master (the Lord Jesus) does show us extraordinary favor and preferential treatment. The New Testament is piled high with promise upon promise: forgiveness and grace now to live as a disciple of Jesus, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, eternal life without the presence of sin, death, and the devil in the new creation, the resurrection of our bodies, an eternal home in the very presence of God, feasting at the marriage feast of the Lamb, and on it goes.

But from our vantage point, we strive to be faithful in every area of life. At home, at work, at play, with our possessions, time, and talents. We desire to bring all things under the lordship of the Lord Jesus Christ so that we might be conformed to His image. In short, we desire to be faithful so that on the Last Day we will hear those glorious words spoken by Jesus to His beloved people, "Well done. Good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your master (Matt. 25:21) ... Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Matt. 25:34).

Life in the Christian Church is a dynamic, never dull, experience of faith, obedience, love, and forgiveness. You dear saints, are the beloved of the Lord. Grow in Christ. Be forgiven. Forgive others. And live faithfully in the life and grace of the Lord Jesus. Well done, you good and faithful servants of our Lord Jesus.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.