

“We are One...”

Matthew 18:15-20; Romans 13:8-14

September 10, 2017

Fifteen years ago, we celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the founding of College Lutheran Church. As you might imagine, in preparation for that great event, we dug our way through the church archives and found some fascinating treasures there, the dusty “Dead Sea Scrolls” of College Lutheran Church.

Amongst those old documents was a binder with a faded label, “Minutes of the Church Council-1870” *typed, typed* mind you, on what was probably one of the first typewriters ever sold commercially in 1868. Yes, indeed, College Church has always been on the cusp of technological developments.

The minutes of the Church Council contained what you might expect: financial reports including the offering each Sunday, Sunday School attendance, worship attendance *by name*, and so forth.

But then, I came across a very interesting Minute, or rather series of Minutes which continued for several months, concerning a member of the congregation who was being brought up on charges. Yes, you heard that right, *brought up on charges* before the Council.

Mr. Jones (of course, the names have been changed to protect the innocent, or the progeny thereof), was accusing a fellow member, Mr. Smith, of having an illicit relationship with Mr. Jones’ spouse. As evidence against Mr. Smith, Mr. Jones described how he came home unexpectedly one afternoon to find Mr. Smith on the premises and in close proximity to Mrs. Jones, whereupon Mr. Smith attempted to flee by crawling out a bedroom window which, unfortunately for Mr. Smith, was on the second floor. Here, there is a notation that one of the Council members observed that he had seen Mr. Smith in town with his leg in a cast. Mr. Jones corroborated that observation by saying he, himself, had taken Mr. Smith to the hospital. A member of the Council applauded Mr. Jones for his Christian charity under the circumstances. But Mr. Jones conceded he did this for less than altruistic reasons in that he did not want the neighbors to see Mr. Smith lying on the ground outside his bedroom window with no shoes on and a broken leg. There concluded the Council Minutes for May.

Trying not to damage the fragile onion skin paper, I raced ahead to June to see what came next, wherein it was recorded that the Pastor had made a visit to Mr. Smith on the pretext that he had not seen Mr. Smith in church for the last few Sundays and wondered if the cast on his leg was the reason. Mr. Smith allowed as how, yes, that was reason he had not been in church due to the fact that he had broken his leg in an unfortunate accident. The Pastor then informed Mr. Smith of the accusations brought to the church council against him by Mr. Jones and invited Mr. Smith to appear before the

Council to defend himself. Mr. Smith said the accusations were outrageous and declined the offer.

Having heard this testimony from the Pastor and in the absence of any refutation by Mr. Smith, the motion was made to *excommunicate* Mr. Smith and bar him from any and all church functions until such time as Mr. Smith would agree to appear before the *entire College Lutheran Church congregation*, confess to what he had done and beg forgiveness from God and from the congregation. End of the June Minute about Mr. Smith.

There was no entry about this in the July minutes which was rather disappointing. Ah, but then in August, the Pastor reported that Mr. Smith had come to him to request he be allowed to confess to the congregation. It seemed that Mr. Smith owned a small business here in Salem and, for lack of customers-presumably connected to his infidelity and excommunication-he was about to go out of business. One Council member objected on the grounds that Mr. Smith was doing this only to save his business and not because he was truly contrite. Discussion ensued. Finally, the Pastor weighed in by pointing out that it didn't much matter how God had driven Mr. Smith to his desire to confess, he must be allowed to do so! Which he subsequently did. He was restored to full membership. The vote was close. But, it still took a while before his business picked up again.

And, in answer to what you're wondering about, "No," nothing was recorded about Mrs. Jones. But, we might guess that between Mr. Jones and the Ladies Aid Society of College Lutheran Church, her punishment more than fit the crime.

Well, we haven't excommunicated anyone for quite a while, but today's Gospel spells out how we should deal with people who have wronged us. The Council Minutes didn't indicate if Mr. Jones followed this biblical protocol exactly, but what is clear is that both the Minutes and today's Gospel compel us to put this above all else: that we regard our relationships with God and with one another as both **serious** and **sacred**, and do all that we can to preserve and nurture those relationships.

St. Paul in this morning's passage from Romans sums it up concisely when he says, "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor..." And when an expert in the law, tested Jesus with a question: "Teacher, which commandment is the greatest in the Law?" Jesus answered, "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Mark 12:36-39).

Now, you may be thinking, "Well, that's a nice Sunday School lesson. We learned that a long time ago. No surprises there. But what struck me about those Minutes from so long ago and the words of St. Paul and Jesus is how *seriously* the Scripture and our predecessors here at College Church took this matter of relationships. They actually *excommunicated* people whose actions harmed or damaged relationships

within the College Church community. And, it was like a wake-up call to be reminded of how precious are the relationships that we share as members of this congregation. And, that is something we, perhaps, too often take for granted.

One such precious relationship that I must admit I have way too often *taken* for granted was *taken away* this past Thursday morning. I just expected to see-and Pass the Peace with-Glen Rosendahl here on this Sunday morning, just like last Sunday. And, in the past, to see him not only on Sundays, but to see him almost every day in the office for eleven years while he was on our staff. What a great friend he has been for more than 30 years! Oh, we had our disagreements to be sure, but we always managed to make up before either of us got excommunicated! Yes, I will miss Passing the Peace with Glen, as will many of you. The service will probably be appreciably shorter without Glen here because Glen wanted to Pass the Peace with everyone!

His death made me ask myself how many other precious relationships in our congregation and elsewhere do I just *take for granted*? What about you? Yes, of course, many of you also will miss seeing Glen every Sunday. But, he would be the first to ask, "What about *these others* who are seated all around us this morning?" There is a veritable cornucopia, an abundance, of precious relationships all around us in this room, many of whom we know; but, some of whom we *don't* know. These are precious relationships waiting, just waiting, to be known. Will you please be sure to greet at least one person you don't know?

So, in a few minutes we will, as is customary, "Pass the Peace," an *ancient* greeting that Christ himself used with his disciples (Luke 24:36; John 20:19, 26). "Peace be with you." As we "Pass the Peace," this morning, let us please be especially mindful of what precious gifts **we are to one another**; what precious gifts Glen and all the Saints are to us; and, that in Christ, we are One Body, One Spirit, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of us all.

The Peace of the Lord be with you... (*And, also with you*). Thank you! Thank you very much.

*Pastor Dwayne J. Westermann  
College Lutheran Church  
Sept. 10, 2017*

