

“Don’t judge! Or judge?” Matthew 18:15-20

“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

Did you know that our today’s Gospel reading is specifically mentioned in our constitution? We all should read our constitution, it is a good one, and contains many good things, which, if observed, would help us to live out practically our identity as Lutheran Christians. I encourage you to read it.

Now we will have a little experiment to see how much the devil has managed to confuse us. Can you guess in which section of our constitution these words of Jesus are mentioned? In fact, that entire section is based on these instructions. The section is called ... “Church discipline”. Yes, church discipline!

Is there anyone who likes the sound of this phrase “church discipline”? Is there anyone who likes the sound of the word “discipline”? ... The devil has been working overtime to confuse God’s people and to distort our perception.

Most people these days don’t want to hear about discipline. It is associated with coercion, with forcing us to do what we don’t want to, even with punishment. Who would like that? But the word “discipline” comes from Latin and simply means learning to live according to certain instructions.

For us Christians those would be the instructions given to us by our Lord. This is what Jesus commanded the Church – to make disciples who will live their new lives according to His instructions. You see, it’s all good, but we have been conditioned not to like the whole discipline thing.

I will give you two quick examples how the devil has managed to confuse us; we all should be able to recognize them. First one. The risen Lord Jesus, commands His apostles, His Church, to go and make disciples from all nations. This is as clear a command as we can get. If we faithfully keep this command, then, when the Holy Spirit wills, new disciples are brought into the Church.

Who wouldn’t like that? The devil... So, he works to stop us. He replaces Jesus’ command with his own lying comments. “You know, your faith is just your private thing, you don’t want to be offensive, don’t push it on others, be nice!” Probably most of you have heard this one.

See what he does? He redefines what the Gospel is. Our God says that the Gospel is the power for salvation for everyone (Rom 1), that it is Spirit and life (John 6), but the devil confuses us and insists that that is just our personal preference, not to bother others.

Jesus sends us to proclaim the Gospel to everyone, for that is how true faith is created and how people are rescued from under the power of Satan and brought into the Kingdom of God's Son. The devil insists that we shouldn't be pushing our "personal preferences" on others and should keep silent... and tragically many Christians are deceived to listen to the latter.

The other example has to do with our today's Gospel reading. Jesus says that "if your fellow-saints sin, then go and tell them about it, and if they listen to you, then you will have regained your brother or sister".

Now, think, who would really hate that part of us regaining our brothers and sisters? Yes, the one who tries to lure them away from the community of God's saints. To stop us from doing what Jesus commands, the devil comes up with another nice sounding slogan.

"Whatever you do, just don't judge anyone! Try to be loving and caring and supportive, just don't judge people!" I imagine we all have heard this one in many forms and quite often. And, unfortunately, many Christians are deceived, and what is worse, as the result, many brothers and sisters may be lost.

And, of course, we should not be judgmental, in the sense of looking down on others and criticizing them, and often not seeing the log in our own eye. But that is not what Jesus is talking about in our today's Gospel reading.

I invite you today to meditate on these words of Jesus and to clarify for ourselves what is going on here and what it means for us, and perhaps we can begin to appreciate and delight in the concept of "church discipline" again.

First, we need to see the big picture, so to speak, of what is going on. Remember, the Holy Spirit reveals to us that since the Fall we all are born with this incurable disease, we have death engraved on our hearts. We are hostile to our very Creator. We rebel and rage against Him, and despise anything even remotely related with Him. That's us. Fallen humanity.

But He, our gracious Creator and Father, He wouldn't leave us to rot in this misery, He just wouldn't give up on us, even as we fight against Him. His commitment to us is even hard to comprehend, He doesn't spare even His own life so that only He could rescue us and lead us to the glorious future for which He has destined us. He does all of that.

He comes as one of us, as Jesus from Nazareth, He takes our place on death row, He suffers the rejection of all, then agonizing death on the cross, and then He rises triumphant and victorious, crushing all our mortal enemies – sin, devil

and death. Then He send His messengers across the world to proclaim His reign, to deliver the message of eternal life and thus to bring all His beloved back to our true home, to be with our Father and our Brother Jesus.

Yet, our enemies don't cease their efforts to destroy us. They are like waves; they just keep coming and coming. They keep tempting, lying, distorting, confusing... our enemy is the master of deception. He whispers:

"You don't need to sacrifice your time to mix with those Church people to be a good Christian. The Church is mostly for the old and strange folks, and many of them are such hypocrites. You can be spiritual without being religious.

And the stuff they believe is obsolete anyway, we live in a different age, you need to go with time, you are free to do what your heart desires, don't let that religious stuff to restrain you. Enjoy your life!" So many have fallen for this... If you recognize that this may be happening in your life, wake up! and run to Jesus, as fast as you possibly can!

This is why Jesus intervenes and gives us heads up with our today's Gospel reading. He reminds us how significant every one of us is to Him, how much He cares for each one of you, and especially for those who are under attack and struggle to stand on their own.

The picture that Jesus gives us is this. Imagine that you see that the enemy has cunningly lulled to spiritual sleep someone you love, and now is wrapping his tentacles around them, ready to drag them away from Jesus into the abyss of death and darkness.

How would you react? How should we react? Isn't that obvious? But this is where the enemy starts spitting his lies: "Don't judge anyone! Be accepting of what people do! Be supportive!" See what he does?

He essentially says: "Don't stop me, don't hinder me!" He disguises his snare and his plan to destroy our loved ones by saying that that is what they want, let them be, don't intervene! Let them perish... But Jesus will have none of this. This is why He speaks to us today!

"If your fellow-saints sin, don't give up on them, go and tell them, bring them back!" In Jesus' eyes the one who is under the attack is the one who needs the most attention. And look, how important each one of us is for Jesus!

Jesus' instructions reflect that. We know to what length He went for us, and here we see to what length He instructs us to go. "If you see you brother and sister sinning [and we need to see if for what it is – they are being overcome by the enemy], go and tell them, go and warn them!

If they don't listen, don't give up, don't let them perish! Take someone with you, two or three fellow-saints, pray and put in your joint-efforts! Just don't

give up! If that still doesn't work, get entire congregation involved, pray for your brother or sister, and do what you can to bring them back." Do we do this?

This is how we are to see our situation in this cosmic battle field. The invisible forces of darkness will continue to rise and battle against us, they will ambush us, when we are the weakest, the most vulnerable, when our feet are ready to slip, and they will strike. With cold calculation, without mercy.

We also need to discern which attacks are the most dangerous. When I hear about someone sinning, I first picture something to do with 4th to 8th Commandments. But is that the worst thing that could happen? Someone may be struggling with those sin, and still looking for God's forgiveness and help.

What is much worse are sins against the 1st Commandment. We may be outwardly perfect in our lives, but deceived by the enemy, we may grow complacent and indifferent towards our Creator and Redeemer, and His Church.

Then the enemy persuades us to believe that we don't actually need this Triune God. We are doing just well. We are good. That is when we need all the help available to pull us back, out of the quagmire of the devil's deception.

I guess that right now we feel more or less okay, it seems that we stand firm ... for now. But remember what Paul wrote to Corinthians: "Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." (1 Cor 10:12) That's a chilling warning to all of us.

If one of us falls, and it may be anyone, how good it is if we can rely on others! How comforting it is to know that if we are lulled into sleep, and the tentacles of the evil one are closing around us, our brother and sisters will not keep silent, they will not give up on us, and by God's grace and in the power of the Holy Spirit they will fight for us.

That is why God gives us the community of saints. Our dear Lord Jesus is great. Great is His faithfulness to us, and great is His commitment to us. Great are His instructions and great is the gift of His Church.

This is what church discipline is about. It is about us learning, practicing and helping one another to live the new life as Jesus' disciples. This is why we are here. So that no one would be left to battle on their own. So that no one would be ambushed and dragged away while no one else rushes to help.

May the Holy Spirit help us to follow the example of our Lord – caring for our loved ones, being ready to endure even conflicts, being rejected and to suffer if needed, keeping our eyes on the ultimate goal, the salvation and eternal life, where we will feast together with all God's saints.

And then, what an incredible joy it will be – to see there those brothers and sisters, whom we helped to regain.

Amen.