

Thomas R. Cook  
Sermon #482 Trinity Church – Swarthmore, PA  
8:00 a.m. Celebration of the Holy Eucharist  
The Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 7, 2008

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**“All Beloved of God”**

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Scripture: Matthew 18:15-20; 17 Pentecost A, Proper 18 (RCL)

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I am a Gentile. My father and my mother are Gentiles. Their parents, all of them: Gentiles. As far back into the mists of time as the sketchy narratives and crumbling vital records of our family recall, we have been Gentiles. Are there traces of non-Gentile blood and tradition lost somewhere in my past? Perhaps. Perhaps even likely, given enough history. But how would I know? I am a Gentile: always have been, and so I will remain.

And in this understanding of my identity I take hope. For when I consider what it is that Jesus did for me, a Gentile, I am not threatened or demoralized or insulted by the insensitive recollection of Jesus’ words given in Matthew’s gospel today. I am not put down by this teaching that the Christian community should treat an offender as one would treat a Gentile. I am a Gentile, and what I know is that I have been accepted by God, not for my own goodness or my own perfection, most certainly not for my “Gentile-ness.” It is in and through the life of Jesus that God has reached out to me, a Gentile, to embrace me within that larger community of humanity, into that community with the Jewish people, through

whom God promised that all the world would be blessed.

While I have no doubt that the adolescent church in Jesus' day perceived in this teaching its intended denigration ---you see, to treat one as a Gentile or a tax collector was to avoid and ostracize an individual, snub them for their unworthiness and uncleanness--- I take comfort in the fact that Jesus himself communed with Gentiles and called a tax collector ---Matthew, no less; the man to whom today's gospel is attributed--- to serve as one of his most trusted companions. In the eyes of Jesus, to treat one as a Gentile or a tax collector may be more akin to drawing them more fully into community than kicking them out.

We should take care how we use the Bible. Rarely is there utter clarity on a given issue; rarely is there only one way in which things are perceived and recorded. It is compilation about life, not a handbook defining it. Like it or not, we who read the Holy Scripture bear the responsibility of its interpretation and of its use, and it will frequently cause us to pick and choose our way.

Take, for example, today's lesson from the Exodus: it is the will of God to strike down all of Egypt's firstborn, Gentiles that they are, yet not omitting even to kill the Hebrews in the land, unless the blood of their sacrificed animals rests on the lintels of the

doorway. I heard this story as a youth and was exhilarated by the power, the adventure, the suspense, the overwhelming superiority of God, and the idiocy of those hard-headed Egyptians. When deMille filmed *The Ten Commandments* and Charlton Heston delivered God's threats to Yule Brenner, the Pharaoh, I couldn't wait to see those Egyptians get their due.

Then I served as a priest for a time in Paris. It was there I met a young international, a woman separated from home and family. She was a flight attendant who had suffered a nervous breakdown far from home. Her parents refused to retrieve her, she had no friends who would speak for her. She became a ward of the state and an inmate in a sanatorium in the French countryside. I met her through the church in Paris. I visited her in her home, a stale, institutional tile room with a cot and a photograph of her parents. I went to see her, compelled by a call from Christ to reach out to the lonely and the sick and the stranger. And she was an Egyptian. Suddenly, the story of the Exodus took on a little less bravado for me and a lot more humility. Though I have no doubt that she is loved by God, how can she read the story of the Exodus and celebrate?

So which is it: a God of power and destruction, or a God of love and forgiveness? Did Jesus look down upon Gentiles and tax collectors, or did he embrace them in the hope and work of reconciliation? I, for one, hold to the latter. The world is filled with hatred and darkness and suffering and destruction and prejudice quite apart from the work and

will of God, I believe. How we choose to see the world matters. We are responsible for that choice.

So I want to return to Matthew's teaching on the community of the church. When we are offended by another of our number, we are to take our offense to that other in order that reconciliation may begin. If they receive our word, we come together again, but if not, we take witnesses to the conversation, who implore the offender to change their ways, but if not, the situation comes to the entire church, and should the offender remain offensive, we are to treat them as a Gentile and a tax collector. I will take that to mean that they remain a part of the community to be loved, served, and won, rather than as pariah to be cast out with no hope for reconciliation. For the truth which isn't offered by Matthew this morning is that, sometimes, the offended have no real ground upon which to stand. Sometimes we take offense at something which shakes our sensibilities, but maybe because it should. I gather those who supported the slave trade a few centuries ago were dreadfully offended by Christians who called them to account for their practices. And rightly so. I gather there are those who are offended when their prejudices are questioned or their beliefs assailed.

I take as this story's deepest lesson the one of humility in the way of Jesus. While we are to bring our hurts and concerns before one another, confront one another when we feel wronged, we must do so humbly, recognizing that even the offender ---even the Gentile or

the tax collector, even the Republican or the Democrat, even the Baptist or the Jew, even the African American or the woman, even the warrior or the peacemaker, even the homosexual person or the straight person--- even the Gentile and the tax collector are all beloved of God.

Take care how we use the Bible. Take care how we bear our offenses or hold our grudges or judge our neighbors. Though Gentiles and tax collectors get the bad wrap in today's lesson, they remain an intimate and integral part of Jesus' community. Perhaps, even for those who offend us, it is the same as well.