

A Conference Sermon
Delivered to the Southern Illinois District Pastoral Conference
April 21, 1987

Note: The main paper at this conference was Dr. James Qualben's presentation of "Peace in the Parish," a program then being promoted throughout The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod." His focus on parsonage life is the life context behind some of the emphases in the following sermon.

+

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After He said this, He showed them His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you." And with that He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

John 20:19-31

This is the text that was assigned to me. Now I'm not complaining but I was disappointed when I was told to preach on this text for this service. I've got a text that I've wanted to preach on for a long time and thought this would be my chance. The committee thought otherwise. But I want to give you that Bible passage anyway, Numbers 15:32-36.

While the Israelites were in the desert, a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day. Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. Then the Lord said to Moses, "The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp." So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the Lord commanded Moses.

The Book of Revelation says that we shouldn't add to or detract from the words of prophecy written in this book. I hope I don't do that, but I'd like you to imagine what went on in the tent of this Sabbath breaker. Let's assume he was married. It doesn't say; just assume it. One possible scenario is this: Dale Meyersohn says to his wife Diane Meyersohn, "My dear Diane, you are such a wonderful bride, a blessing like Sarah to Abraham and Rebecca to Isaac are you to me. To ease your toil, let me go out and gather some sticks for you as you prepare the Sabbath meal." To which Diane Meyersohn protested, reminding her solicitous husband that such work was forbidden on the Lord's Sabbath. It could have happened that way...but probably didn't.

It's more likely that Diane said, "Dale Meyersohn, you lazy son of Israel, lying there on the couch watching Sabbath day football. The least you can do is go out and get some sticks for the fire while I toil over your Sabbath day dinner." To which he replied, saying something to the effect that such work was forbidden and he really was fulfilling the commandment by watching football on the couch.

Well, whatever happened on the inside of that tent, we do know this for sure: The Sabbath, which was given to Israel as a sign of the covenant, was violated and so the covenant people became quite concerned.

You are a part of God's covenant people. You are the church, or at least part of the church. You are members of the body of Christ. We don't know what goes on in your tent, your parsonage, but when you step out of the parsonage door, the church, the covenant community, is affected for good or for ill. The breaking of the Sabbath was not good for that ancient community. When you go out of the parsonage into the public with bitterness, guilt, frustration, anger... too little of God and too much of self, the body of Christ is concerned and can easily be hurt and offended.

The body of Christ, however, doesn't always know what to do. *Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him.* When problems in the parsonage are spilling over into the life of the church, today's Christians may not know what to do either. But God does. God steps in with Gospel.

Listen to the text. *Then the Lord said to Moses, "The man must die. The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp." So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the Lord commanded Moses.* Doesn't sound like Gospel, does it? The Bible doesn't tell us whether this man repented or not. He may very well be in heaven right now, for all we know. Still, the text doesn't sound like Gospel. Punishing sin is Law. But look at it this way. By this act, God reaffirms that His people are holy. God reaffirms that the Sabbath is holy, holy because it is a remembrance of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. God reaffirms that His people are a covenant community, the body of Christ. They are a holy people, for He removes sin from them. Beneath the text, there is Gospel here! God's alien work directs us to His Good News.

Jesus steps into our homes today. He steps in to reaffirm that we are a holy people, a holy church, holy families, holy pastors, holy pastors' wives, holy parsonages. The fact of our holiness came at the cross and in the garden. At the cross, the sins of Sabbath breakers and shalom breakers was punished in His body. In the garden, God accepted the holiness of Christ, our holiness, by raising His Son from the dead. Those glorious facts of our holiness are reaffirmed every time you and I practice confession and absolution. Not just in church through set ritual, but in our homes when husband and wife admit their sins against God and each other and then speak the word of forgiveness. That makes for peace. Peace in the parsonage and peace in the parsonage that comes

from confession and absolution promotes peace in the whole body of Christ. It was given so clearly in a certain New Testament passage.

On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After He said this, He showed them His hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.

Again Jesus said, "Peace be with you! As the Father has sent Me, I am sending you." And with that He breathed on them and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone his sins, they are forgiven; if you do not forgive them, they are not forgiven."

You know, maybe I did preach on the assigned text after all!

Now that I've satisfied my longing to preach about the Sabbath breaker, think finally about his neighbors. Tent after tent after tent of covenant people, holy people, the body of Christ. I suspect that in many of those homes the same temptations were present. I suspect a lot of the neighbors' wives said, "You son of Israel, go out and get me some sticks" or a lot of husbands said, "Let me do something for you; I'll go out and get you some sticks." But instead of succumbing to temptation and then spreading it throughout the covenant community, they dealt with it immediately in their home. That's the way it should be. Husband and wife applying Law and Gospel, husband and wife confessing their sins and forgiving, husbands and wives living as holy people behind closed doors. Maybe I should say "closed flaps." Those people never made it into the Bible. They never became the stuff of a conference sermon. But with them God was well pleased.

May God be well pleased with your parsonage life. In a quiet and unnoticed way, may your parsonage life reaffirm that we are a holy people. Even as the neighbors demonstrated that Sabbath, the day of rest is holy, may your home life demonstrate your commitment to Him who gives eternal rest, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Copyright © 2002 Dale A. Meyer