

“We Reserve the Right to Refuse Service to the Lazy”

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November 18, 2007
Text: II Thessalonians 3:6-13

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The *Des Moines Register* carried a story two weeks ago about a man in a small town in eastern Iowa who was kicked out of his church for not following the rules. Rather than summarize, I'm just going to quote from the article:

The letter officially revoking Wayne Lienen's decades of membership in the Trinity Lutheran Church in this eastern Iowa community did not come as a shock.

Two previous letters from Pastor Gary Sears and the Conroy church's board of elders informed Lienen that he hadn't received "The Lord's Supper" at the church in the past two years, and newly enacted rules said that if he didn't show up and take communion, he would be kicked out.

That wasn't the only thing. He would no longer be welcome to take communion there after his expulsion, even if he was so inclined, and the 66-year-old man's family could not hold his funeral in the church when the time came.

Then came the real kick in the gut: Any plots he "leased" in the church cemetery would be "forfeited and returned to Trinity."

Lienen's first wife, Ardath, who died 19 years ago, was buried there, just a few steps from the church building. He bought – or at least he thought he bought – four side-by-side plots when she died, and he always intended to be buried next to her.

Now, the church had taken away his remaining plots. It meant that a stranger would one day be buried alongside his wife.

And that, Lienen decided, was unacceptable. So he had her dug up and moved.

...
Lienen . . . drifted away from the only church he had known in his life, thinking he might one day go back.

"They started coming after me to get going again," he said. "I got a letter every month saying I should go to church.

"They sent me Bible verses in the mail. They called and came to visit. They told me right out that they wanted me to donate money. I didn't have the money, and I told them so. But they kept after me. I got tired of it."

Lienen said a member of the congregation became even more direct, telling him he would lose his burial rights next to Ardath if he did not return and donate to the church.

"I said, 'Who are you to say something like that to me?' That really made me mad. They ended up driving me away from that place."

Then came the letters and the official action revoking his membership, which the church described as "self exclusion."

...
Wayne, who has remarried, said he does not regret having Ardath taken from the Trinity church cemetery.

"Don't get me wrong; I hated doing it," he said. "But sometimes a man has to do things that aren't easy. It goes down a little better when you know it's the right thing. I always thought that church was about what you believe in your heart. Am I wrong about that? I sure never thought in my life that church was about something like this."

Every congregation has certain rules – written and unwritten, by which it governs and ministers and worships and conducts its life. What would be some of our unwritten rules? "When we meet, we eat." "The worship service shall not runneth over beyond 11:15." Anyone else have ideas? Every congregation has rules – it's true today and it was true 1900 years ago in the early Christian church. Early Christian communities had extensive historical precedents for policing their own members.

In our text for today, Paul lays down some of that policing policy – some of those rules. Remember, Paul had founded the church in Thessalonica, the capital city of ancient Macedonia, early in his missionary work on the European continent. At the time the church was founded, and through the early years of its life, there was a prevalent belief that the return of Christ, and the end of the age, were immediately at hand. In the first letter to the Thessalonians, Paul had dealt with concerns that had arisen within the church about the fate of those who had already died. He assured the congregation that all who had professed faith in Christ would be with the Lord forever. The second letter, which apparently was written very soon after the first, addressed another problem concerning the belief that the end was near. Apparently, some in the community had taken the attitude which implied that, since the Lord was expected to return soon, they were free to put down their tools, have a seat, and wait for His return. Why start that new project this morning when Christ will be here before the coffee break? Don't bother stocking the shelves or tending the garden, Christ will return this afternoon.

Some of the people in Thessalonica weren't working for theological reasons; some weren't working because of just general shiftlessness – laziness. Paul was less concerned about the reason for the inactivity than he was about the end result. So Paul gives them some advice. He lays down some rules. First, believers are to keep away from other believers who are living in idleness. Paul tells them that when he and his companions were in Thessalonica, they were not idle. They worked, and they worked hard – night and day – so as not to be a burden to anyone. He also reminds them of the other rule he gave them when he was with them, a phrase that is not likely to be listed among the most inspirational sayings of spiritual leaders, but which expresses a basic norm for the community: “Anyone unwilling to work should not eat.” If you don't work, you don't eat. Paul leaves nothing to the imagination when he says that he has heard that some in the community “are living in idleness, mere busybodies, not doing any work.” Now please remember, Paul is not concerned about people outside the body of Christ. This text could easily become a club used to beat those who are out of work, especially the long-termed unemployed. This text doesn't apply to them, Paul is concerned about the church. These are rules given to the faith community for the faith community. Paul probably would have said the same thing the Iowa pastor said about the church membership issue: “We think it's best to keep this between us, in the family.”

Paul was very concerned about the church. In his first letter to the Thessalonians, one reason given to support the “no work, no eat” rule was that it would enable the church to command the respect of those outside the church. Paul says: “Aspire to live quietly, mind your own affairs, work with your hands so that you may behave properly toward outsiders.” For Paul, it was important how the church was viewed by pagans. His view was that a church full of thumb-twiddlers did nothing to commend itself to the pagan public. So he advised the church to take a responsible course of action in this respect. “Christians are to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.” And his final word to them is “not to be weary in doing what is right.”

Now it is difficult to make the transition from the problems and concerns of a tiny first-century group of Greek Christians to ours as Christians living in an affluent, western nation in the 21st century. We don't share the circumstances of living in a communal relationship where the refusal of some to work has immediate impact on the rest of the community. We have long since become an institution of like-minded believers, rather than a tightly knit community of disciples who count on each other for life and sustenance. While it may be too harsh to say that we do not live in anticipation of the return of Christ, we certainly have noted that 2000 years have passed without its occurrence and have long since gotten used to the notion that the established order in which we live may well be here for a while. What, then, is applicable to us in this teaching of Paul? Well, in any time, under any circumstances, work is a gift from God. The talents and abilities which we are given and the strength to be involved in daily labor are given to us as a gift from God. Committing ourselves to work is one important way in which we give God praise and express our worship.

We may have something to learn from the Shaker Movement, which originated in America in the late 18th century. The Shakers believed that the return of Christ was near, and that believers were called to lives of faithful preparation for His coming. The Shakers shared Paul's concern about the dangers of idleness and its tendency to create problems within the community. Central to the disciplines of the faith for Shakers was the importance of work as a way of expressing one's worship of God. From this grew their motto: “Put your hands to work and your hearts to God.”

During any time in the life of the church, including our time, there has been important work to be done in order to sustain the community and further the work of God's kingdom on earth. There is work to be done – not church work, but the work of the church, which is the ministry in which we are partners. All of us should

receive a tool apron. I want to thank you and congratulate all of you for the decision to call Christy Dew as our Associate Pastor. With the calling of additional staff comes the opportunities for additional ministries and the necessity for all of us to be involved in some manner with the work – the ministry of the church. It is also incumbent upon us to support that ministries with our dollars. But let me assure you that no one is kicked out for failure to pledge! When all share in the ministry in the work, the community thrives and individuals grow as disciples. When the work is shared disproportionately, an excessive burden falls on the few and what should be inexcusable becomes the order of the day: we allow people to be inactive in their faith, to their detriment as well as that of the community. That is why Paul was so bold as to say that the situation should be confronted.

During any time in the life of the church, idleness has been fertile soil for trouble and discontent. This is no less true today than it was in Paul's day. It's too easy for us to snicker at Paul's words about those who are "living in idleness, mere busybodies," and to assume that they only apply to those within the church with whom we have had run-ins or who have been bothersome to us. It's too easy to use Paul's words to construct caricatures who don't resemble us. Yet, the truth is that we allow idleness to distract us from time to time, and when we do, there is usually more temptation to gripe, gossip, complain, or feel sorry for ourselves than there is the experience of deepening our faith. By contrast, many of the instances in which we find ourselves "stuck" can readily be helped if we follow the simple principle of committing ourselves to work. When we're going through one of those periods in which we feel unsettled and uncertain about our faith, maybe we should stop wringing our hands and volunteer our time working for a community organization or project. Put your hands to work and your heart to God. When we're feeling sorry for ourselves because we haven't received the amount of appreciation or affection we would like to have or think we deserve, why not spend the afternoon visiting people who are homebound due to illness or circumstance. Let's see if it's really true that we receive love when we devote ourselves to giving love. "Put your hands to work and your heart to God."

In the movie *Dead Man Walking*, Sister Ellen ministers to a man who is a convicted murderer. She struggles as she encounters the families of his victims who deeply resent her support of the man who had murdered their children. By the end of the movie, a father of one of the victims has warmed up to her. As she leaves the cemetery where the convicted murderer has just been buried, the father says to her, "You sure have a lot of faith, Sister." She sighs, and says, "I wish it was that easy. It's not just faith. It's work."

Faith is the ground on which our lives are built. It is the support and foundation to which we turn in times of challenge and need. Yet, it will become barren and useless land if we only stand there and fail to commit ourselves to the work to which our faith calls us. When the Shakers urged each other to put their hands to work and their hearts to God, they weren't making up something new. Paul had made the same strident appeal to his brothers and sister in Christ many centuries earlier. As he urged them "to do their work quietly and to not be weary in doing what is right."

As we worship today and dedicate ourselves again to the call of Jesus Christ in our lives, we would do well to hear those words, and for as long as we are able, to put our hands to work and our hearts to God.

Let us pray: We know your ways, God of Grace, yet too often you find us living in idleness, acting as busybodies, not doing any work. We take your grace for granted, as if we have all the time in the world to get our lives straightened out, to get our faith figured out, and our lives worked out. We have seen the witness of the saints, yet we are slow to imitate their ways. Do not come and find us lacking. Give us strength to change.

Thanks to J. Lynn White for insights used in this sermon.