



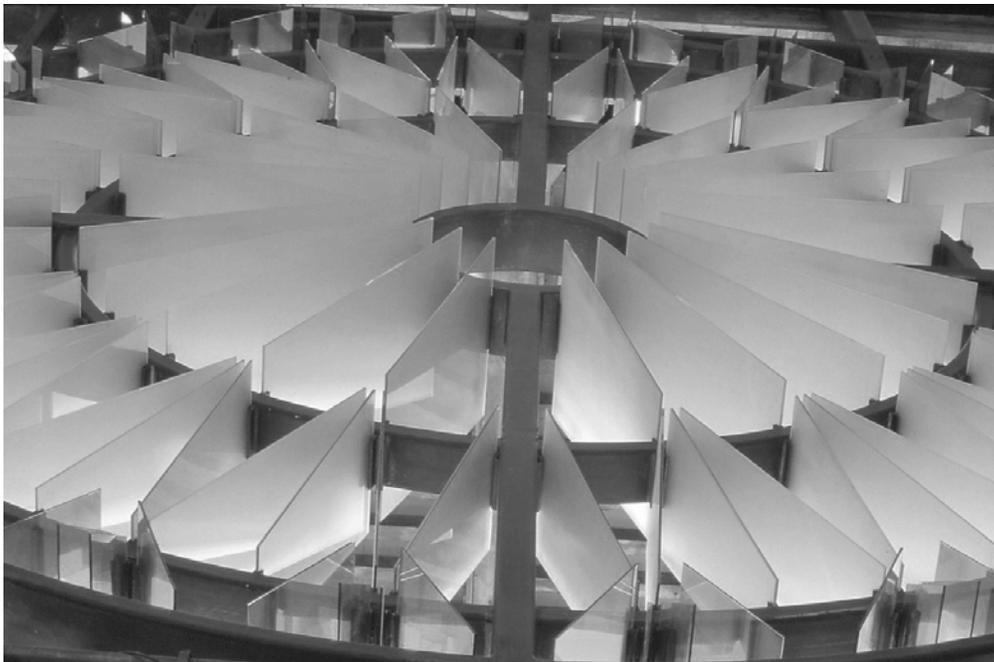
SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

BINDING TO OUR BEST VALUES

THE VERY REV. DR. STEVEN L. THOMASON

THE FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST, SEPTEMBER 10, 2017

EZEKIEL 33:7-11; PSALM 119: 33-40; ROMANS 13: 8-14; MATTHEW 18: 15-20



Matthew 15: 21-28 [*Jesus said, “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”*]

Elbert Parr Tuttle was a young lawyer in Atlanta who spent a weekend each month serving as commander of a unit in the National

Guard. In 1931 he was deployed to a rural town in Georgia to prevent a riotous mob from lynching a black man accused of raping a white

woman. He succeeded in that, only to witness a jury of twelve white men take just two minutes to find the man guilty and sentence him to execution.

Tuttle found the evidence presented to be weakly circumstantial, and worked for three years seeking appeals on the man's behalf, only to see him executed for the alleged crime. The experience so moved Tuttle that it shaped the rest of his life, committing his life to the work of justice.

“Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”¹

These words from Jesus offered to the disciples, and by extension to the Church—that is, you and me, here and now—these words are something of a puzzle to scholars. At one level, he is apparently bestowing considerable authority on those who follow him and work in his name, but with that authority comes profound responsibility since the community represents Christ in the world, and acts in God's name. We should embrace such authority with great care and a full measure of weighty temerity.

Scholars generally agree that Jesus, as captured here in this passage in Matthew's gospel, was offering direction on how to settle disputes in the community, even how to address doctrinal disputes. Surely the early Church struggled with such conflicts, and we have ever since.

But Jesus seems much less interested in hierarchical debates and doctrinal positions

than he is with those on the margins. Who is in, and who is out of the community seems a non-sequitur for Jesus; the least, the lost, the little ones marginalized by the powers that be are always gathered and welcomed into the community that Jesus conceives, and the Church would do well to bind to such a radical hospitality as well while loosening its grip on the dualism of insider and outsider, friend and foe.

A survey of just this 18th chapter of Matthew's gospel has Jesus offering a series of parabolic admonitions to those of us who would follow: better to tie a millstone around your neck and jump into the sea than to cause a little one to stumble; leave the 99 sheep to go rescue the one who is lost; and here, if you exercise authority, make sure you have the vulnerable in your field of vision. His messianic vision demands nothing less.

The problem is that we exercise authority that is often so entrenched in our worldview, in our cultural contexts, in our life stories, that we often are blind to the impact our decisions have on those who are vulnerable in our society. Where we choose to live, where we shop, where we attend school, the ways we choose to see some people who pass by us while remaining blind to others, even how we demagogue those with whom we disagree, making them enemies—all these are often so deeply imbedded in our contextual lives that we are challenged to even cast gospel light upon them as decisions borne in the power we have. And Jesus is asking us to consider it all—the whole

of our lives—by the impact our decisions have on the most vulnerable in society.

My friends, today we launch back into a new program year. This is Ministry Sunday, previously known as Homecoming Sunday, presumably because some of you may have spent your summer Sundays somewhere other than here in worship. Well, welcome home!

In the south, this kick-off is often called Rally Sunday, in the best sense of the word—"to gather and organize and inspire anew for common cause." Today, we rally as a community, gathering, organizing and hopefully inspiring anew. Check out the ways in which we come together by checking out the Ministry Fair in Bloedel Hall.

It is my fervent hope that what you see here, what you experience and engage here is borne out of our commitment to bind on earth what is bound in heaven, guided by our best values, inspired by a worldview that broadly seeks to serve the least, the lost and those most vulnerable in Christ's name.

We use the covenantal language of respecting the dignity of every human being, and striving for justice and peace, and seeking and serving Christ in all persons, proclaiming the good news of God in Christ. Those are the commitments and actions that guide our decisions, here in this community, and hopefully in our individual lives day by day. What does it look like for you to bind such things on earth, in your life?

For Elbert Tuttle, that experience of seeing an innocent black man killed by his government changed his worldview, changed the course of his life. Decades later at age 97 he would be buried in his church's cemetery--All Saints' Episcopal Church in Atlanta—where he and others had real disagreements about the Church's role in race relations in this nation. He never left the church even when others disagreed with him—he held the space for others while holding fast to his convictions.

His chief legacy was as a federal judge, and particularly as Chief Justice of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, with jurisdiction that spanned the Deep South, from Georgia to Texas, the crucible of so much racial unrest in the last century.

He is known as the chief jurist of the American Civil Rights Movement of the 50s and 60s because his appellate court meted out the Supreme Court's rulings in communities most desperately in need of restorative justice while ensuring the misappropriations of power by lower courts and lawmen were repeatedly quashed.

Elbert Tuttle courageously bound himself to such a cause, even in the face of great conflict, even in the face of threat of personal harm, making decisions with the most vulnerable in mind.ⁱⁱ

This week we've witnessed some rather distressing developments in this nation's continuing struggle with xenophobic fear, and it begs the question again to you and me: What

will you bind on earth, in your life? How do your decisions resonate with Jesus' invitation to consider our authority as disciples of his, bearing God's mercy and grace and love in this broken hurting world? Can we rally to be the Church here and now, as discouraging as this world may seem at times, rally—that is, "to gather and organize and inspire anew for common cause." Will you be Christ's hands and heart here and now?

This much I know: you and I have been invited by Christ to be such a community right here, right now.

ⁱ Matthew 18:18. Much of the exegetical content of this sermon is drawn from an essay by Stanley Saunders of Columbia Theological Seminary in Atlanta, GA. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3392

ⁱⁱ The story of Elbert Tuttle came to me first by Stanley Saunders, *ibid.*, with additional research online and through All Saints' Episcopal Church.



Saint Mark's Cathedral lives in a grounded faith and spirituality; we seek to liberate people for ministry. We are grounded in ancient Christian scripture and tradition while at the same time remaining open to the insight and truth of contemporary life. You'll find Saint Mark's Cathedral actively involved in service and outreach to our community. Together we pray, worship, study the scriptures, and explore the richness of twenty-one centuries of Christian experience. Wherever you are on your journey of faith, you are welcome here!