

The Ninth Sunday after Pentecost  
The Reverend John H. Brock

Saturday, July 31, 2004  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Ecclesiastes 1:2, 12-14; 2; 18-23; Psalm 49:1-12;  
Colossians 3:1-11; Luke 12:13-21

Grace to you and peace from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Some friends of mine - Paul and Vanessa Miller - are visiting the Brocks this week. They were suppose to be here at this service tonight, but they weren't able to because of other responsibilities. Paul and I have known each other, we figured out, for over twenty-five years now. We met when I was in college and Paul attended the near-by seminary. Paul and Vanessa serve as missionaries in Japan. They are with an organization called the International Chapel Ministries. And in their capacity with ICM, Paul teaches English both there at the Chapel and at a local school. Then on Sunday mornings they assist with the worship and faith building of all those attending worship. ICM is a multi-denominational organization. That means that they're not affiliated with any one specific denomination. For that matter, the people that serve there are of all different denominations.

They teach English classes at the chapel. On the one hand it is a little bit of a gimmick, to try to get people in because they hold English classes that are very inexpensive. Many of the folks in Japan want to learn English, and so they come for those classes. And the hope is that they will come to learn English but stay for the worship. It must be working because they have been doing this for several decades and right now they're averaging over 400 people on a Sunday between the morning and the evening worship. And that's in a culture that, should one choose to change from the religion of their family to Christianity, their family will cut them off entirely. They will be treated as though they were dead.

Now Paul told me a story about one of the folks who had been coming to the chapel for a while. I have to call him Mr. Smith, because I can't pronounce his Japanese name. So Mr. Smith had been coming to the chapel at first to learn English because it was such a good deal, and Mr. Smith is cheap. Mr. Smith is also short tempered, brusque, grumpy, and rude. Just exactly the kind of worshiper that you want . . . to go someplace else. But, he kept coming to the English classes, and after a while, he began attending the worship services. He continued to be short-tempered, grumpy and rude, but he WAS worshipping. Eventually he took home a Bible and read it. He made all kinds of notes. He came back to the Chapel with all these pieces of paper sticking out of his Bible. He cornered Paul, and he said "I have questions. You answer!" Paul by this point had known Mr. Smith for several months and understood his personality. (Perhaps you also need to realize that my friend, Paul, is a six foot tall Canadian, and Mr. Smith was short, even by Japanese standards). But, Paul says to Mr. Smith, "No. I am not going to answer your questions, because you are simply looking for an excuse not to believe. How about instead we pray now, we pray and talk with Christ about the forgiveness of your sins?" Well, Mr. Smith did not like this. "No. No, I don't pray now, I pray later." And Paul said, "No, you won't pray later, because you're afraid. You're afraid to let go of who you are. You are afraid to stop being who you are and you are afraid of who you might become if you do let go." Paul continued, "Now why don't you go over and talk with Pastor Ken," (he is the senior pastor there) "Why don't you go and pray with Pastor Ken and then come back and pray with me." Well, rather grumpily Mr. Smith did do that, he went and prayed with Pastor Ken and then came

back and prayed some more with Paul. And he was still short tempered, grumpy and rude. But the next week, when he came back, he didn't seem to be quite so grumpy. And the week after that he was not nearly as short tempered, and about three weeks later his wife came into the chapel.

Now we've all heard the saying "opposites attract." This was not true in the case of Mrs. Smith. If there was ever a female version of Mr. Smith, it was his wife. She was probably a template for Shakespeare's *"The Taming of the Shrew."* This was not a woman that you necessarily enjoyed being around, and she cornered Paul and she said to Paul, "What have you done to my husband?" Well, Paul thought that she was going to go on to him about the fact that Mr. Smith has left the beliefs of his ancestors, but instead she said, "He's smiling. He's thrown out all of his depressing opera records. He's bought Bach and Beethoven and he is listening to these. What have you done to him?" And so Paul explained, about the love and forgiveness of Christ and the Grace that our Lord gives to us. He invited Mrs. Smith to join not only in the English classes, but in worship as well. And Mrs. Smith began to come.

After a couple of months their daughter showed up. Their daughter, who is the proverbial princess -- she doesn't want to get her hands dirty, she has mean sarcastic comments about folks that she doesn't like, and she won't associate with those that she deems "beneath" her, "What have you done to my parents?" ... Within a couple of months, she was helping with the clean up, she was aiding in the ministry with those of a "lower class."

Mr. Smith's mother-in-law showed up, the incarnation of every mother-in-law joke you have ever heard. A woman you do not want to be around. She is just not a polite person. "What have you done to my daughter and her family?" Over the course of three years, seven members of Mr. Smiths family became believers in Christ. They had seen the change that had happened in him, they saw the change in the one who had become sick and tired of BEING sick and tired.

In our lessons tonight we heard St. Paul write a message to the Colossians and to read it to us from a different translation, a paraphrase called **The Message**:

"So if you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that's where the action is. See things from his perspective.

Your old life is dead. Your new life, which is your real life—even though invisible to spectators—is with Christ in God. He is your life. When Christ (your real life, remember) shows up again on this earth, you'll show up, too—the real you, the glorious you. Meanwhile, be content with obscurity, like Christ.

And that means killing off everything connected with that way of death: sexual promiscuity, impurity, lust, doing whatever you feel like whenever you feel like it, and grabbing whatever attracts your fancy. That's a life shaped by things and feelings instead of by God. It's because of this kind of thing that God is about to explode in anger. It wasn't long ago that you were doing all that stuff and not knowing any better. But you know better now, so make sure it's all gone for good: bad temper, irritability, meanness, profanity, dirty talk.

Don't lie to one another. You're done with that old life. It's like a filthy set of ill-fitting clothes you've stripped off and put in the fire. Now you're dressed in a new wardrobe. Every item of your new way of life is custom-made by the Creator, with his label on it. All the old fashions are now obsolete. Words like Jewish and non-Jewish, religious and irreligious, insider and outsider, uncivilized and uncouth, slave and free, mean nothing. From now on everyone is defined by Christ, everyone is included in Christ.

*Colossians 3:1-11*

For Christ can take whoever we are and make us into a new creation. As Mr. Smith went from being that mean, irritable, grumpy man to one who is smiling and happy and listening to positive music.

The gospel lesson even, we had the rich man who if he would have done the biblical thing, and given his excess to the poor, allowed them to come through the fields and take that, he would have been fine, but he wanted to keep it for himself. He refused to be that new creation, he wanted to remain WHO he was because he was afraid of who he might become.

Now I realize that we are Lutheran. We're resistant to change. (How many Lutherans does it take to change a lightbulb? None; we don't like change). Yet, change is what we're encouraged to strive for. To change FROM our old ways of selfishness, to change TO the new ways of CHRIST. To change FROM the earthly ways of living: fornication, impurity, passions, evil desires, greed, anger, wrath, malice. To change TO the new life of Christ: Grace, love, peace. When we are sick and tired of being of being sick and tired, Christ calls us. Christ welcomes us and Christ tells us that we are all the same: Loved, forgiven, and accepted.

Amen.