

The ELCA Highjacks Matthew for 9/11

Is "forgiveness" the proper response to terrorism? The ELCA's *Daily Discipleship* devotional for September 11, 2005, implies as much (www.elca.org/evangelism/dailydiscipleship). It highjacks Matthew 18:21-35 in order to promote a political agenda: In the face of terrorism, one must forgive. The devotional is riddled with problems:

1. The devotional doesn't take the text seriously. It says that Peter is "free" to forgive. Not in Matthew 18:21-35. In this text forgiveness is law. One must forgive -- "from the heart" (vs 35) -- in order to be forgiven by God. This legal requirement, also found after the Lord's Prayer (6:14-15), in no way implies freedom. In Matthew the Christian can and must fulfill the law (Matt 5:17-20, 48). God's forgiveness is conditional on our forgiving others. Instead of dealing with what Matthew actually says, this ELCA devotional simply uses the text as a springboard for its own agenda: The proper response to terrorism is forgiveness.

2. The devotional makes "forgiveness" a new law. Lutherans have never been pacifists (CA 16) or fundamentalists (We have not simplistically derived political programs from Bible verses.). It finally doesn't matter if "forgiveness" is a hard law, as in Matthew, or a soft law, as in the ELCA devotional. In both cases it's "law."

Can we fulfill the law? Can we do it? No. Even our best efforts at forgiveness, like other good works, are broken. We deceive ourselves when we say we forgive and forget. We cannot and do not do it right. We end up in pride or despair. Thus we are driven to the foot of the cross where we receive what Christ alone gives: forgiveness and freedom.

Christ frees us to go back in the world to restrain evil using common reason and the sword.¹ So what about terrorism? Do we "just forgive"?

3. The devotional gets lost in psychology. The devotional ignores the evil of terrorism. Instead, it wallows in the therapeutic effects of forgiveness. It's good for your health, says the ELCA. Of course this is true in psychology, but the Christian is called to restrain evil, not accommodate it for the sake of one's inner peace. Neville Chamberlain may have been psychologically well adjusted, but to those who were being gassed, Winston Churchill was the better neighbor.

¹See Bonhoeffer in CrossAlone.us, under Heavy lifting, Ethics, Basic distinctions