

Be Willing to Say Hard Things ¹

† winning hearts (v.15)

† resolving matters (v.16)

† harmonizing in heaven (vv.17-20)

In the Name of Jesus Christ, our winsome Savior, dearly redeemed children of God:

A Christian nurse heard a brilliant surgeon in the office wanting everyone to know he was really upset. A pastor had dared to say he was sinning by living with his girlfriend unmarried. He has lots of company. It seems hypocritical, meddling to point out someone's sin. And yet think of the irony here.

Without humility the surgeon could not see love like his. Who goes into medicine unless they want to help and heal? Doesn't practicing medicine require that sometimes you have to tell patients the opposite of what they want to hear? Would any surgeon let a pastor critique his operation? What pastor would want to, since we hold surgeons in such high regard? Most of us could not tell what's inside a body if our life depended on it, much less have the cutting skill to remove the most obvious tumor. So how can a surgeon see for spiritual surgery which can only be revealed by the Holy Spirit in God's Word?

Today's First Reading (Ezekiel 33:7-11), makes the case for malpractice against pastors who fail to speak up. No malpractice insurance will save us who ignore or condone open, unrepentant sin. If love requires doctors to say hard things, how much more won't God's love be echoed by *The Church God Wants to Be Willing to Say Hard Things*. "*As I live, declares the LORD God, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from their way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why should you die, O house of Israel?*" (Ezekiel 33:11 EHV) God wants to bless by...

† winning hearts (v.15)

Jesus' description of spiritual surgery has love written all over it. In the verses before our text Jesus is protecting little children who believe in him. (18:6,14) Now He says, "*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his sin just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother.*" Keep your eyes on the goal: regain your brother; win him over with God's love. If his house were on fire early Saturday morning, you'd wake him up, wouldn't you? If you stayed silent in the heat of such obvious peril, you'd not just be loveless or careless, you'd be a killer.² But imagine your joy when your dear neighbor and his family emerge from the smoke unharmed, thankful to be alive!

Jesus is obviously not talking about sins of the heart, but open, unrepentant words and actions contrary to God's Word. "*Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God?*" Sadly, most church people only remember the *sexually immoral* sins like adultery and homosexuality which Paul lists in 1 Corinthians 6:9-11. They miss *the greedy...drunkards...verbally abusive...swindlers*. They forget how Jesus bears down with God's law on sins of the heart in His Sermon on the Mount. (Matthew 5-7) God does not discriminate; He calls us all to repentance. Repentance more than remorse. Repentance is sincere sorrow over sin, but also faith in forgiveness.

God's kindness is **winning hearts** by keeping it as small as possible, "*just between the two of you*" to "*regain your brother.*" That was one of the first lessons I learned teaching high school. Not just teenagers, but everyone responds better in private when given the love and respect we all need to listen.

¹ From the 2023 WELS Worship Foundations series: *The Church We God Wants: A Church Willing to Say Hard Things*.

² Schroeder, Jonathan E. *Commentary on the Propers – Year A*. NPH © 2022. Proper 12, pages 271-274.

✠ resolving matters (v.16)

Fact is, we all need a heart transplant from the Great Physician. Even King David had to pray, *“Create in me a pure heart, O God. Renew an unwavering spirit within me. Do not cast me from your presence. Do not take your Holy Spirit from me. Restore to me the joy of your salvation. Sustain me with a willing spirit.”* (Psalm 51:10–12 EHV) Jesus wants His Church to **Be Willing to Say Hard Things**, because **resolving matters** brings *an unwavering spirit* and the *joy of salvation* to the soul.

Jesus continues His heart surgery: *“But if he will not listen, take one or two others along with you, so that ‘every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.’”* (16)

Jesus’ love keeps presenting by referring to the *one or two others* you need to take along as *“witnesses.”* Jesus wants brotherly love to permeate our efforts to seek the straying and rescue the lost from unrepentant sin. *Witnesses* come alongside you to confirm that this sin is serious and repentance is needed. They witness the reaction whether good or bad. If a repentant, humble heart responds like King David, *“I have sinned against the LORD,”* we get to express the LORD’s full and free forgiveness immediately: *“The LORD himself has put away your sin.”* (2 Samuel 12:13) And anyone else who knows about the matter can be told, “They were repentant. Let’s move on together in God’s grace and mercy.”

✠ harmonizing in heaven (vv.17-20)

If loving persistence has not yet paid off in repentance, our hope of expressing God’s mercy in Christ continues: *“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And, if he refuses to listen even to the church, then treat him as an unbeliever or a tax collector.”* (17) This has been called the congregation’s “last act of love.” For the straying sinner lost in unrepentant sin, excommunication is a formal action taken by Christ’s command to His Church. Jesus wants us to **Be Willing to Say Hard Things** like a skillful, caring doctor who knows he has the sure cure. But if that cure is refused, it’s not the doctor’s fault for trying. Maybe the patient can return later. While there’s life, there’s hope.

Hypocrites in the church? Yes, one was named Cephas (Peter), another Barnabas. Both had to be publicly called out by Paul for their hypocrisy. They were treating Gentile believers as if they were required to follow Old Testament Jewish law. Fortunately, Peter and Barnabas listened to Paul’s rebuke. Jesus promises, *“Amen I tell you: Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Amen I tell you again: If two of you on earth agree to ask for anything, it will be done for them by my Father who is in heaven. In fact where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am among them.”* (18–20) To *agree* is symphony.

Jesus is giving unique authority to His Church on earth. The Office of the Keys gives God’s authority to unlock guilt by forgiving the sins of penitent sinners as we do in the Absolution. But the locking key is used to fasten the chains of guilt on an unrepentant sinner even if he or she is a famous politician, whether the Roman pontiff agrees with his bishops or not. Christ’s authority trumps all authority by God’s Word in God’s Church. Listen! Can you hear it? **Harmonizing in heaven.**

As a Christian congregation tells a penitent sinner, “Your sins are forgiven,” the chains of guilt and condemnation fall off in heaven too. This is certainly God’s desire and the hope of fellow forgiven sinners that all would come to repentance and be guilt free. After all, Jesus Himself carried our sins to the cross when *“the LORD...laid on him the iniquity of us all...By his wounds we are healed.”* (Isaiah 53)

I wish you could’ve seen her smile long after her near excommunication. When she left, it seemed she was cutting herself off from God’s love. A few years later here she was, joyful to visit New Life and give me a hug, telling how God worked in her life. Harmony in heaven! God’s concert of joy and peace. As we pray for forgiveness in Christ and wisdom from above, our heavenly Father is eager to grant our requests in *concert* with Jesus’ Name. In the glorious light of spiritual surgery and full forgiveness our church family grows closer to each other too. **Hard Things**...soft landing, pure grace in Christ. Amen.