
What are You Binding and Loosing?

A sermon by Canon Wallace Marsh
Proper 18 - Year A

“Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

We heard Jesus say those words a few weeks ago to St. Peter in Matthew 16, and we hear Jesus say them again today in Matthew 18: “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

Two weeks ago, I remember telling Thee Smith, who teaches our Greek class, that those words were some of the first verses I translated in Greek. I asked Thee why my professor gave us those words and not some other verse. Why not the verse, “God so loved the world he gave his only begotten son,” or “Rejoice in the Lord always,” or “Take, eat, this is my body?” Of all the possible verses, why did the professor have us translate, “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven?”

Of course, Thee (the wise professor) didn’t have to hesitate before answering my question. He said, the verbs “to bind” and “to loose” had many different meanings and our professor wanted us to experience the different translations the Greek would render. It is an exciting verse for someone learning to translate the Greek text.

On this start-up Sunday, when our Sunday school classes and weekly programs resume, I am drawn to that “start-up” verse used in my Greek class. What are we binding and loosing in our lives?

The word “bind” could also be translated ‘tying’ or ‘chaining.’ The word ‘loose’ could also be translated as ‘untying,’ ‘dissolving,’ or even ‘destroying.’ What are we binding and loosing in our lives?

We bind and loose ourselves in relationships. We bind and loose ourselves to jobs. We bind and loose ourselves to family members. Yes, we even bind and loose ourselves to God.

In today’s epistle reading, St. Paul says, “put on the armor of light” and “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.” We are to bind ourselves to God like a soldier binding armor.

There is a hymn attributed to St. Patrick of Ireland. It is one of my favorite hymns and is the final hymn in our service today. The words are supposedly taken from *St. Patrick’s Breastplate*. If you have a drop of Irish blood in you, I think that you will enjoy this hymn. As you sing, notice that Patrick uses the word “bind” over and over again, as he talks about binding himself to God.

St. Patrick’s words remind us that binding yourself to God involves intentionality and determination, because in today’s world we have the choice to bind and loose ourselves to pretty much anything. I believe on this start-up Sunday, we are called to follow Patrick’s example by binding ourselves to God. But how exactly do we do that?

Jesus says, “Whenever two or three are gathered in my name I will be in the midst of them.” Perhaps we bind ourselves to God when we participate in worship and in classes and small groups within a community of faith.

Let me just say that if you have young children or teenagers at home, it might feel like you are binding them in ropes and

chains to get them to worship or Sunday school.

When I was growing up, the most difficult and unchristian hour of the week was the hour before church. My sister and I were constantly fighting with my parents on Sunday mornings. We wanted to sleep in. We didn't want to dress up. We didn't find church fun.

Dad would run around the house yelling it was time to leave for about 30 minutes, and then when he realized no one was listening, he would go out to the car and lay on the horn, saying words that cannot be spoken from this pulpit; all because we were making him late for usher duty!

Sunday mornings were ugly. They were ugly because my parents had a deep faith and they chose 'binding' over 'loosing.' There is no doubt in my mind 'loosing' would have been the easier option.

Let me be honest with you from this pulpit, the more they bound me to church, the more I wanted loose. My bad behavior continued from the home into the church. According to my mother, I ran off many a good Sunday school teacher. And like today's gospel, there were two or three witnesses in the church reprimanding me for my behavior.

As a matter of fact, my earliest memories of Sunday school are being kicked out of class and my parents spanking me in the parish hall bathroom. And just to spite them, I made it a point to cry loud enough to disrupt worship in the next room ... and look where I am standing today! God has a sense of humor!

And that brings up a good question, one that I will conclude with this morning. After all that drama and struggle growing up, why in the world am I standing before you today as a priest? Why in the world did I decide to bind myself to something I wanted loose from for years?

As a child, I often wondered what was so important about Jesus and the community of faith that my parents are willing to go through a weekly struggle to get us there. Why were they binding themselves when it was much easier to loose that commitment?

About the time I remember watching both of my parents lose a parent. I had never seen my parents experience such grief. During those days, I watched them take comfort in the scriptures and hymns of the burial services. I watched as their friends from church surrounded them during those difficult days. I began to see the power of binding yourself to God and the community of faith.

A few years later, when I lost three of my teenage friends in a car wreck, I was grateful that my parents had bound me to a church. I had an altar rail to lean on, a God I could touch and taste, and the people sitting next to me in the pews were filled with grace.

I knew there would come a day when I had the choice to bind or loose those ties for myself ... that day came ... and it came again ... and it will come again tomorrow, because that day is every day! The decision to bind ourselves to God is a decision we must make every day.

My journey has taken me to different places and parishes, and I stand in this pulpit as a priest today because I have experienced the power of Christ in worship and community.

On this start-up Sunday, Jesus says, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." As a new year of classes begin, let us choose to bind ourselves to God and one another. AMEN.