

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time, Cycle A

Ezekiel 33:7-9; Romans 13:8-10; and Matthew 18:15-20

When I grew up in a family of eight kids, we shared one bathroom, slept 3-4 to a room and packed into the family station wagon. I was part of a culture where we had to “stay in the room” when differences arose and we could not simply end relationships with the click of an “unfriend” button. As Americans have repeatedly made the choice to talk only to people who agree with them, we have lost our skills for living in community. We have ended up in the present crazy situation where voters are disgusted when government leaders fail to compromise but leaders do better in the polls when they are stridently uncompromising. We end up in crazy situations like the one near my home where a parent beat an amusement park worker senseless because the worker asked him to put on his mask. The rights of the individual have overwhelmed the rights of the community.

In this milieu, our readings present a strange perspective: all three talk about our responsibilities before God for one another. First, we have Ezekiel, whom God appoints as religious and moral watchman for the people. The metaphor makes pointing out people’s sins sound noble and useful: of course, someone who sees danger about to impact the community should alert everyone! However, watchers on city walls look outward and Ezekiel was charged with looking inward to spot the Israelites’ sinfulness – a less welcome voice. Before we dismiss the idea of anyone being the Morality Police, pause to consider that God commands us to be watchers for each other. I think about my teen-age daughter informing me that I had no right to judge her behavior and my ardent reply that indeed I did. The right to decide for ourselves what is righteous is a fallacy from God’s perspective. What’s more, we need to speak out because an individual’s sinful choices end up slopping over onto others; consider racism, consumerism, sexism, bullying, euthanasia, abortion or abuse where one person’s rights suck up the rights of another. Our sinful choices are indeed a danger to the community living within the city walls with us.

Next, we come to Romans 13, where Paul has been explaining how Christians should behave toward the Roman government. Paul writes in vs. 7, “Pay to all what is due them – taxes to whom taxes are due, revenue to whom revenue is due, respect to whom respect is due, honor to whom honor is due.” He elegantly moves us from taxes and revenue, purely political words, to respect and honor, which belong to both the political and spiritual. In Greco-Roman society, respect and honor were about status and power, but in Jesus’ view, they are concerned with the dignity of all people. So Paul carries us to vs. 8, “Owe no one anything except to love one another.” The realm of status has become the realm of self-sacrificing love. We owe everyone this treatment. This is not *philos-love*, love for friends; it is *agape-love*, care for each person’s dignity and well-being. The Golden Rule is a ramrod to straighten our moral spines into this kind of love: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” In other words, when black people are harmed, when asylum seekers are sent back to the homes they fled or homeless people sleep on the street, we must ask, “Do we want to be treated that way?” Our own desires will keep us honest.

Finally, the gospel presents part of a sermon Jesus gave on community life. Jesus starts with psychologically sound advice: if someone hurts you, let them know about it directly. We should not allow ourselves to be bullied. At the same time, we are not to harm the other person by talking to everybody but the person we are upset with. When the person will not own up to the wrong they have done, Jesus says get help, first from a couple of friends and then from the whole church community. This is different from degrading arguments on social media because everyone in the community is conscious that their behavior is tied to their intimacy with God. “Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven.” By virtue of our baptism, we have a commitment to love as God does. Christians should not even imagine employing the lies and vitriol commonly used in modern discourse. If we come to tough conversations with an awareness that “where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them,” we *can* talk respectfully, we *can* let God guide the conversation and we *can* reach a truly peaceful resolution.

- ❖ Listen to the suffering of someone else and do not interrupt, even if you feel defensive or judgmental.
- ❖ Who has hurt you that you need to speak to directly? Can you imagine this happening with Jesus in your midst?