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Epiphany Lutheran Church, Castle Rock, Colorado
Proper 18, Series A (Pentecost 14)
Saturday, September 9th, 2017
Sunday, September 10th, 2017

Sermon: The Watchman's Calling

Text: Ezekiel 33:7-9

Focus: God charges pastors to keep watch over our souls, calling us to repentance and life.

Function: That they would heed the voice of God through the preached Word.

Structure: Story-Framed

Locus: "We should fear and love God so that we do not despise preaching and God's Word, but hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it" (SC, 3rd Commandment).

Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!

Amen.

"You can't tell me what to do!"

"Where do you come off telling me that I'm wrong?!"

"Mind your own business."

"Who made you the judge of me?"

"Why are you acting all 'holier than thou'?"

"Instead of preaching about sin, why don't you say something more *positive*?"

Have you ever heard somebody talk this way when they were confronted by their sin or offended by the pastor's sermon? Chances are good that you and I have said something like this ourselves. We don't like to be told that we're wrong, and we don't appreciate other people butting into "our business," as we see it. Many of operate by the motto "Live and let live." Tolerance has become the cardinal virtue of post-modern America, a wonderland of sin in which anything goes, including gay marriage, smoking marijuana, aborting babies, and doctor-assisted suicide, among many others.

But as a Christian, if you speak out against any of these evils, people are quick to misquote Jesus, saying, “Judge not, lest ye be judged” (Matt. 7:1, KJV). Pointing out other people’s sins is perceived as impolite and an offense to the libertine streak that runs rampant in our society. In America today, there is no greater evil than to appear intolerant or “bigoted,” however liberals define that changing term tomorrow.

And yet in our Old Testament lesson today, the Lord God, Yahweh, reaffirms Ezekiel’s call to be a prophet. Yahweh tells Ezekiel:

“So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul” (Ezek. 33:7-9, ESV).¹

Yahweh appointed Ezekiel as a “watchman” over the entire nation of Israel. If a watchman saw the enemy approaching and warned the city, but they chose to do nothing about it, then their destruction would be on their own heads. But if a watchman saw the enemy at the gate and didn’t blow the trumpet to warn them, then he would be to blame for the deaths of his countrymen.

So too for Ezekiel. His prophetic role was to warn the wicked of their sin so they could repent and be saved. Just as the watchman of a city stayed alert for enemies and danger, so also Yahweh’s prophet kept watch over the souls of the nation (cf. Ezek. 33:1-6). As a spiritual watchman, Ezekiel had to warn his fellow Jews about God’s coming punishment if they refused to repent of their sins, especially the sins of idolatry and oppression of the poor.

Because Yahweh is holy, he takes sin extremely seriously. Unrepentant sinners are doomed to death and damnation. But God doesn’t want anyone to die for their sins. He wants

¹ All Scripture references, unless otherwise indicated, are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version.

all people to be saved (1 Tim. 2:3-4). “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Ezek. 33:11). Our loving Lord is a good and gracious God, and he promises that anyone who turns away from their sin and returns to Yahweh will be saved—“he shall surely live” (33:16).

That is why Ezekiel’s calling was a matter of life and death—for both him and his hearers. If he ignored their sin and turned a blind eye, saying and doing nothing about it, then they would not have a chance to repent and live. They would still die for their sins, but God would also hold their sin against Ezekiel as well. He’d also put himself in spiritual danger if he said nothing about the sins of his flock.

So today God calls pastors, parents, and the government to speak against the sins of others. For example, in our epistle lesson, we learn that the government is God’s servant to punish evildoers (Romans 13:1-7). The most basic function of government is to provide order by restraining evil. Yet because we now live in a disordered world that calls good evil and evil good, it is ever more necessary for pastors and parents to step up to the plate and call sin “sin.”

It almost goes without saying, this is not one of the functions of a pastor’s calling that we are eager to carry out. It’s always tempting to avoid major issues or only talk about sin in a generic way so as not to offend your hearers. Yet as soon as you start talking about specific sins, people get uncomfortable and criticize the preacher, wondering why he can’t be more tolerant or with the times. St. Paul warns that in the Last Days, “people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions” (2 Tim. 4:3). In other words, people tend to like pastors who tell them what they want to hear.

But my calling is not to flatter you or entertain you. Like Ezekiel, I too am a watchman, charged with the oversight of your souls. No wonder that one of the New Testament words for those who serve in the Office of the Holy Ministry is “overseer.” The Bible instructs pastors: “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching. Persist in this, for by so doing you will save both yourself and your hearers” (1 Tim. 4:16). The pastor’s calling is to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted. My job is to hold up the mirror of God’s Law to your conscience in order to show you your sin so that you stop sinning and cry out to Jesus, “Lord, have mercy!” Throughout the New Testament, the Apostles, writing under divine inspiration, command pastors to rebuke sinners and castigate those who refuse to repent. “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim. 4:2). Did you catch that word “rebuke”? According to the dictionary, it means to “express sharp disapproval or criticism of (someone) because of their behavior or actions.” The Bible specifically tells pastors to do *just that!*

See, when pastors preach, it’s not just a matter of opinion. We preach the Word of God. And if Yahweh gives us a Word to speak, shame on us if we do not speak it! So if one of my sermons offends your pride or upsets your conscience, then the Lord will reward me for actually doing my job. I am a watchman over this congregation. And for me to do otherwise would be a violation of my ordination vows and Jesus’ calling on my life. To abdicate the pulpit to tolerance and the spirit of the times (*Zeitgeist*) is to make alliance with Anti-Christ and be complicit in your damnation—and my own.

Parents also are charged with this terrible office of serving as watchmen over their children’s souls. The Bible clearly teaches that parents have the primary responsibility for teaching their children the Word of God and raising them in the Christian faith (Deut. 6:6-9;

Prov. 1:8; 22:6). But all too many parents turn away from their children's sin instead of calling them to repentance. Rather than making them go to public worship, they let them sleep in on the weekends. Instead of praying with their families and reading the Bible together, parents say that they'll let their kids "make their own decision about religion" when they grow up. If their adult children are "shacking up" with somebody (cohabiting without a marriage commitment), they justify it by saying, "Well, at least they love each other and aren't sleeping around." These are just a few examples of numerous ways in which we are willing to ignore our children's sin for the sake of a false peace in our families.

I realize that many of us think we are doing the loving thing when we do not confront other people's sin. But that is not the case. If you saw a car driving towards a cliff in the middle of a rainstorm, knowing full well that the bridge is out, would you let them keep going? Would you let them drive off the cliff and die? Or would you do everything in your power to get their attention, waving your arms, throwing rocks at them, in order to save them from their doom? Which would be the loving thing to do?

Dear friends in Christ, America is about to drive off a cliff. We have stopped listening to God's Word. We love the honor of men more than we love Jesus and his Word. Are we really willing to let the people we love go over the cliff simply because we're worried about offending them or being branded a bigot?

But what about "Judge not?" When you look at Jesus' words in context, you realize that judging people is not the same as talking frankly about sin. For in another place, Christ himself says to "judge with right judgement" (John 7:24). Jesus does not want us to *condemn* other people; but if we *condone* their sin, we abandon them for the terror of the final Judgment instead.

“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”
(Rom. 6:23).

God does not delight in the death of sinners, but longs for them to turn from their sin and live. That is why God sent his Son Jesus to preach, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). Jesus wants us to turn away from our sin and turn to him for mercy and grace. Repentance is a matter of life and death with eternal consequence. Jesus takes sin seriously, so seriously, in fact, that he says if our hand, foot, or eye causes us to sin, we should cut it off and throw it away, for it is better to enter heaven lame, crippled, or blind than to go to hell with your body intact (Matt. 18:8-9). Yes, Jesus takes sin deadly serious, which is why he died on the cross to *forgive* our sins, not excuse them. “If [a wicked man] turns from his sin and does what is just and right..., he shall surely live; he shall not die” (Ezek. 33:14-15). May everyone we love turn away from sin and turn back to Jesus. O Lord, have mercy on us! Amen.