

The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost—Proper 18—Year A
Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm 119:33-40
Romans 13:8-14
Matthew 18:15-20

The **prayers** and **scriptures** never fail to give us what we need. It is so helpful to have a mirror that's hundreds and thousands of years old to help *us* reflect upon *our time*, to hold *us* accountable, to tell *us* what we need to hear, to sustain *us* with hope.

Our **Collect** reminds us that **our pride will do us in**, and it's *not just* that **boasting kind of pride**, but the much more dangerous "**confiding in our own strength**," thinking **it's all up to us**, and **our will**, and **our power to make things happen**, *instead* of remembering our **very human limits** and **trusting in God's mercy**, *always*.

Ezekiel reminds us that we have a **duty to call one another**, *as individuals and as a people*, we have a **duty to call one another to account**. **Ezekiel** lived in a time of tremendous upheaval and turmoil, and even the people of Israel knew they were in deep trouble. God has heard *the people* say, "**Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?**"

And **God's answer** is clear, **God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked**, but wants the wicked **to turn from their ways and live**. **God yearns** for the people of Israel to **turn back from their evil ways** and wonders, "**Why will you die?**" **God** knows that **Israel is on a path of destruction**, and **God is grief-stricken** that **the people are intent** on this way of death.

But God is also clear, it's *not just* the **problem of the wicked**, but it's *also* the **problem of Ezekiel**; it's *also* the **problem of those whom God appoints to point out what's not right**, those whom **God appoints to warn the people of just where all of this is heading if we don't change course**. **God calls us, just like Ezekiel**, to be **sentinels**, to **keep watch**, to **sound the alarm**—**God calls us to keep alert and stay engaged**.

The **psalmist** understands the *necessity* of **staying grounded in God's law**, in **God's path**, and that it's *always a matter of the heart*. The **psalmist** knows the **temptation of unjust gain**, and in an image that is even more pertinent to our time, the need to **turn our eyes from watching what is worthless**. The **psalmist** didn't know about our **attachment to our screens and social media feeds**, but boy, **do we need that counsel right now**. The **psalmist** invites us to **turn our eyes to God's ways and to find life there**.

And then **Paul** brings it home in **Romans**. As a colleague reminded me this week, this is **Paul at his most mature**, having **attained that wisdom that only comes through a lot of tough experience**; this is **Paul** at the *end of his life* when he's **reflecting and putting all the pieces together**. And *at that point*, it gets real simple—for **Paul**, in the end, there is **only ONE LAW**—the **LAW OF LOVE**. Listen to him: **Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself."** Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

How are we fulfilling the law of love? How are we loving our neighbor as ourselves? How are we doing no wrong to our neighbor? With all the talk of about **law** these days, *how can we elevate the law of love?*

In these really, really tough, complicated, thorny, volatile situations that are roiling our country, **what does fulfilling the law of love that does no wrong to a neighbor look like, in the flesh, on the street, amidst all the decisions that face us in the months ahead?**

Paul then calls us to wake up, to wake from our sleep, and to lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light. What does that look like in your life, in my life? What works of darkness do we need to put away? What would our armor of light look like? Paul calls us to live honorably, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy—in other words, don't engage in behaviors that will dull our capacity to be awake, don't engage in behaviors that will numb us and distract us from the work at hand, and don't be seduced by conflict and fighting and competing and the "but-what-about-this-ing" that we can all engage in.

Paul says, "Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires." Paul is counseling us to get to a bigger frame, to put on a larger mind, to put on the mind of Christ, and not to let our flesh, not to let our limited human capacity to see, drive desires that are equally limited and clouded and misguided. Paul is saying, don't give your flesh full rein, but let Christ who lives in you ground your heart, inspire your mind, guide your spirit, and infuse your actions bending your beautiful made-in-the-image-of-God humanity to the law of love.

Paul LOVED the law, he really, really did, but he came to discover he just couldn't get there on his own under his own steam. Paul knew he had to step out of his small self and into that larger Self that he called Christ—that was the only thing that could save him from himself, that could make him whole and enable him to live this law of love that he knew was the way to life. Paul knew it was only through Christ that one could risk telling another in the community that they had sinned against you, that they had hurt you, as Jesus counsels in Matthew today, and in the end, even if that offender couldn't hear you, to then treat them as a Gentile or tax collector—the very people whom Jesus welcomed to the table. THAT is living the law of love at its most radical level.

Right now, the world needs people brave enough to die to our small selves who believe that we're all we've got. Right now, the world so needs us to shed that self and put on the mind of Christ, to put on Christ in every facet of our being and to fulfill the law by loving our neighbor, all of our neighbors, as ourselves. The world needs us to wake up and to be the sentinels that God calls us to be. Our very lives depend on it in more ways than we can count. The stakes have never been higher, and the next move is ours. As Paul reminds us, it's not yet day; we've still got some night to go, but day is drawing near. Put on the armor of light and help the world remember what it seems to have forgotten—how to fulfill the law by loving one another. Amen.

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