

23rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, Year C

Br. Samuel Springuel

6 September, 2020

1st Reading Ezekiel 33:7-9

Responsorial Psalm Psalm 95:1-2,6-7,8-9

2nd Reading Romans 13:8-10

Gospel Matthew 18:15-20

Growing up, I loved being right. Furthermore, as I'm sure Fr. Peter can attest from the Earth Science class I had with him, when I was right, I wanted the whole world to know it. I would correct almost anyone when I thought they had made a mistake and I seldom waited for an appropriate moment to do so. Discretion had no part in my thinking; when I corrected someone it was immediate and loud.

In this respect, I can identify my younger self with the prophet Ezekiel's commission that we hear today. God tells Ezekiel that he must warn the wicked about their behavior. To fail to do so would condemn Ezekiel himself, making him responsible for the death of the wicked one. God won't hold Ezekiel responsible for the wicked man who fails to reform, but Ezekiel has a job to do and must speak up. This is far more serious than anything I would have been involved in as a seventh grader, but in many ways the behavior can be the same. Ezekiel very well might have been considered obnoxious by his contemporaries, an attitude I'm sure many of my classmates held about me. The know-it-all busy-body who is constantly telling you what you are doing wrong is quite possibly the person you least want to spend time around. Heck, you might even go out of your way to avoid them if you saw them coming.

I've gotten better at recognizing this know-it-all tendency in myself over the years. And thanks to help from mentors like Fr. Peter, I've cut down on the number of times that I insert myself into situations in loud and obnoxious ways, but I have to admit that I'm not completely cured of the tendency yet. I'm still the person who will occasionally interrupt a conversation overheard from across the room in order to correct some perceived factual error. I don't do it nearly as often as I used to, but I still do it often enough that I recognize it as something I continue to need to work on.

But is the sort of life-coaching that I've benefited from something that we should apply to Ezekiel? Surely not. While I was, and to some extent still am, an obnoxious brat, he was a prophet, commissioned by God to speak out. Surely any advice which advises him to keep it down or exercise restraint would be akin to defying God. Ezekiel in particular, and prophets more generally, have a responsibility to decry the behavior of the wicked and warn them of the consequences of their behavior.

Certainly if we look around us, it would appear that many people believe that. There is no shortage of modern day prophets who in speech or book, news report or blog, social media or simple conversation, rail against the perceived injustices of our day. They are quick to denounce, loud in that denunciation, and sometimes even right in their position. Just think about all the culture warriors in the Church stridently denouncing abortion or euthanasia. They aren't wrong, but they certainly can be annoying. Simply silencing them to remove the annoyance is surely not the way to promote the sanctity of life, but I am sometimes drawn to wonder, who is really listening to them?

Fundamentally, I think the true prophet must not simply be animated by the call to Ezekiel. He or she must also be animated by the message of St. Paul today: love your neighbor, do no evil to him. This, of course, is a mere echo of what Christ himself taught. The true Christian prophets first must love the one to whom they are called to give witness. This is not a love that promotes indifference masked as tolerance; a "you do you and I'll do me" kind of attitude. St. Paul is fully willing to commit to the correction of faults and even advises elsewhere to "deliver [the sinner] over to Satan for the destruction of his flesh." But even this extreme is an action motivated by love "so that his spirit may be saved." When we correct out of love, it is because we wish to see the redemption of the sinner, not their punishment. The punishment is merely the means to the end, and if we could do without it, if we could convert the sinner without harming them, without calling them out, without even drawing attention to their sin, we could do it. Because love purely desires the good of the other, and while tough love may sometimes be necessary, it is surely better if gentle love can accomplish the same goal.

So what does this look like? Jesus tells us in the gospel. The correction of love starts small. "Go and tell [your brother] his fault between you and him alone." This is not simply a matter of being discreet, though it is that too. *First* the sinner must be your brother or sister. You must love them, not in some generic way, but in a way that creates a genuine relationship between you and them. It is only from this relationship that you can approach them with correction. It is only in this relationship that they will actually listen to you. If you have not first made the sinner your brother or sister, then you have no standing to correct them. They will not listen to the stranger, regardless of how right the stranger is.

Having established that prerequisite, then you must follow the injunction to Ezekiel and correct the sinner, but here too, pay attention to Jesus's teaching. It is first in private, "between you and him alone." Only when the sinner fails to listen to the gentle, private admonition, do you bring in others. And these others are at first just one or two. Others who also ought to have a first hand experience of the sinners fault and can be true witnesses. If they still will not amend, then you bring in the wider community, and correct them in a public manner. And finally, and only as a last resort, do you denounce them. But even here, at this last step, we must remember, Jesus says to treat them as "a Gentile and a tax collector." Jesus called a tax collector to be an apostle. He healed the servant of a Roman centurion, the daughter of the Syrophenician woman, the Gerasene demoniac. All of these were Gentiles, and there were others too. While Jesus's ministry may have been focused on the children of Israel, he was willing to reach out to the Gentile and the tax collector and offer them a road to redemption, a way to God.

If we are to be true Christian prophets in our current day and age, we must

listen not only to the mission given to Ezekiel, but also to the teachings of Paul, and fundamentally of Jesus Christ himself. We must be informed by the whole of Scripture, and not merely that part which sounds appealing and strokes our own ego, our own desire to be right. Scripture always first challenges us to reform ourselves before we attempt the reform of others. Because it is only insomuch as our own lives have been reformed that we will have the necessary perspective and standing to reform the lives of others.