

Turn Back  
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**Ezekiel 33:7-11**

<sup>7</sup> So you, mortal, I have made a sentinel for the house of Israel; whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. <sup>8</sup>If I say to the wicked, ‘O wicked ones, you shall surely die’, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. <sup>9</sup>But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life.

<sup>10</sup> Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: ‘Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?’ <sup>11</sup>Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?

**Matthew 18:15-20**

<sup>15</sup> ‘If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup>But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup>If the member refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector. <sup>18</sup>Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup>Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.’

Our readings today are about restoration. You might not think so if you linger on phrases like “But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity but you will have saved your life” or “if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile or a tax-collector.” Fortunately for us all, neither of these readings ends here.

Ezekiel was one of the prophets to Israel, chosen by God to steer Israel back to God. He did this as they were losing their independence to the Babylonian Empire and while they were exiled, times when they were searching for deliverance anywhere but with God and times when they assumed God was nowhere to be found. Ezekiel spoke again and again to Israel urging them to turn to God. Again and again they did not and we come in where God is instructing Ezekiel on what to say next. “Now you, mortal, say to the house of Israel, Thus you have said: ‘Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?’ Say to them, As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O Israel?” Despite all of their rejection of

God, over and over, God did not give up and God did not desire their downfall. Instead, God desired a restored relationship. “Turn back, turn back,” says God through God’s prophet, Ezekiel.

This same God of restoration speaks as Jesus through Matthew. We read about one who has offended another. What is the offended to do? In my previous work life I worked frequently with people from China and other Eastern countries and I learned a great deal about their culture in my work. Above all else was the value placed on maintaining one another’s dignity, the value of not shaming another. Accomplishing this in the ruthless and bullying culture of negotiation in which I worked was not easy. Wheedling a better price usually involved comparison to competitors and strong implications of inadequacy for not making the desired price work. Our Western business sensibilities often have no shame in shaming to get what one wants. I’ve heard tell of a company wishing to have their product sold at WalMart. Walking into the conference room to pitch their product, they found they were surrounded by displays of their competitor’s products. The process opened with a challenge from the WalMart team to prove why WalMart should give up space on a product which was already selling for them to take a chance on this competitor. We have no shame in suggesting the inferiority of others.

That is not the culture in which we find ourselves this morning, not the culture from which Jesus spoke. “If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone.” In other words, do not bring shame to the other person in seeking to correct the situation. We know this certainly sets a better tone for restoring the relationship. “But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses.” As Professor Mitchell G. Reddish writes, “The requirement for two or three witnesses comes from Jewish tradition (Deut. 17:6; 19:15), although here the purpose of these multiple witnesses is not to corroborate the prior offense, but to validate the conversation or to add strength to the report given to the offender.”<sup>1</sup> When rebuffed once, rather than write the person off, Jesus says, “go back and try again to restore the relationship, this time with help.”

And should the person remain recalcitrant, unwilling to join in the mutual effort of repairing the relationship, try again. It is important for you to know that the verses immediately preceding our reading today are these: “If a shepherd has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went away? And if he finds it, truly I tell you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of your Father in heaven that one of these little ones should be lost.”<sup>2</sup> Restoration! Go to great lengths for restoration. This is **NOT** an endorsement for abusive relationships nor a suggestion that the

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<sup>1</sup> *Feasting on the Word: Year A, Volume 4*, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 18:12-14.

Bible endorses the suffering of abuse in order to maintain relationship. The context is an otherwise healthy relationship which has had a break-down.

“And if the offender refuses to listen even to the church, let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax-collector.” Now you may remember that both Gentiles and tax-collectors were looked down upon by Jewish society. But is that how Jesus treated them? Jesus who ate with tax-collectors and healed Gentiles? These words at first seem to suggest that those who do not wish to restore relationship should be considered as outsiders, lesser-thans. Until you remember who said them. For those who refuse to be in relationship, do not turn your back on them or be unkind to them but treat them with the kindness you would to one of God’s children, as we all are, Gentile, Jew, prophet, tax-collector. If you, a follower of Christ, the incarnation of the God of love, do not, who will? Without love, there is no hope for restoration. If we are to be followers of this God of love then, even when we are rebuffed as Israel did, as the one who sinned against did, we follow God into the gap where restoration happens. We bridge the distance, modeling God’s love. A childhood neighbor posted on Facebook that weight loss is like driving: If you ever veer off the road, just make a U-turn and head back in the right direction. I don’t think the transitive property implies that weight loss is the same as faith but in our attempts to be faithful followers, if we veer off the road, just make a U-turn, turn back, and head back in the right direction. If you’ve given up on restoration, turn back. So may it be for you and for me.

Let us pray: God of restoration, help us to follow you, we pray. Amen.