

Sept 28 2014 Introduction to Ezekiel 33:7-11

[Invite kids forward to role play.] You can see we're going back in time. What do we have here? [A city wall.] Pretend you are a group of watchmen on a city wall.

Let's get ourselves positioned in the spot watchmen would stand. Let's get our equipment. [Hand out some bull horns.] Let's practice once giving a warning cry. Let's use: "Alert! Alert!" Ready, altogether... "ALERT! ALERT!"

Now, I want you to imagine that you are on watch at the middle of the night. Maybe you'd see a yawn here or there. [Give a yawn, see if a yawn is triggered from them.]

Tell me something as we sit here on the night watch: how many of you like to be awakened from a comfortable, pleasant sleep? Try to give me your best impersonation of what you think your face might look like at that moment. [pause] I bet you'd be grumpy – a little disorientated – not so friendly.

Well, the watchman in Ezekiel's day sometimes had to wake people up from their sleep, even in the middle of the night. Why? Can you think of a time when you would need to take such drastic action? When an enemy force was approaching, people's safety & even lives were at stake.

Might people get upset at you at the moment they are woken up? Yeah. So help me decide what we should do. Should we say: [spoken timidly] "I don't want to get them mad at me, waking them from their cozy sleep; so I'll just keep silent"? OR... Should we yell for everyone to get up, even if it means a bunch of people may be looking at us all ornery, irritated and angry?

It would not only be foolish to keep silent - it would mean having a hand in the death of people, if they died because they had no warning to get to safety.

I'm going to tell you an important truth now. There is something even more important than keeping a person's body safe. God wants their soul to be safe. He wants them to live – he wants us – to live with Him forever. If people aren't sorry for their sins, they need to hear the alert: "Repent! Repent!" That means: "Be sorry. And come to the Lord for forgiveness." Why? Because turning to Jesus (trust in Him) is the only way to have forgiveness of sins and life in heaven.

Listen how Ezekiel, the Old Testament prophet, was told to sound this warning.

Ezekiel 33:7-11 *7 "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the house of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. 8 When I say to the wicked, 'O wicked man, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade him from his ways, that wicked man will die for his sin, and I will hold you accountable for his blood. 9 But if you do warn the wicked man to turn from his ways and he does not do so, he will die for his sin, but you will have saved yourself. 10 "Son of man, say to the house of Israel, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?" ' 11 Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, O house of Israel?'*

Introduction to Gal.2:11-21

[Taken & Adapted from: Hymnal Committee preview from Pastor Bauer emailed Sept 2014]

“Is this a hill worth dying on?” Many of you, I’m sure, can trace that saying back to its origin. In war there were many hills charged at a great cost. The saying has gained wider usage over the years. People ask that question as they decide whether an issue is “worth it”: worth expending precious time & energy - worth the potential conflict (maybe pain, maybe loss) that could result. If the hill is not worth “dying on,” then we don’t enter into battle for it.

In Galatians ch.2 we hear of a hill the apostle Paul stood at, looking up. To serve the Church’s role of brother’s keeper, he would have to admonish Peter. Let’s try to imagine standing in Paul’s sandals. Would this be an uncomfortable step to take? Probably. Do you think Paul might have wondered: what if someone takes the shot at me, “What authority do you, the former persecutor, have to correct Peter?” Maybe. Could this step result in a loss of respect for Paul, or the other hand, a loss of respect for Peter? Could some kind of division arise within the church? Maybe. Yes, maybe. Was this a hill worth the cost? Definitely!

Why? It was worth the risk of personal discomfort or the possibility of painful reactions, because this hill was the heart of the gospel. If this was not a hill to die on, then no such hill exists.

You see... In weakness, perhaps unknowingly, Peter in his actions was communicating: Jesus’ payment was at best insufficient. That threw God’s whole message into question for people who were observing. So...

Paul took on the difficult task of calling his brother to awareness and repentance of his sin.

May the Holy Spirit fill us with the same love and courage as we face our own hills! You stand looking up at that hill when: you see a fellow Christian sin, and they don’t see – or don’t acknowledge and confess it. Maybe they acted in weakness, maybe it was unknowingly. Whatever the case, God placed you in that spot to lovingly call them to awareness, so that they might turn away from the sin and turn to the Savior for forgiveness.

And what about when the roles are reversed, and we are in need – like Peter – of correction? May the Spirit work in us – like him – an acceptance and even appreciation of the news our brothers & sisters in Christ have to share.

Gal.2:11-21 - 11 *When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong. 12* *Before certain men came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But when they arrived, he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles because he was afraid of those who belonged to the circumcision group. 13* *The other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. 14* *When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, "You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it, then, that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs? 15* *"We who are Jews by birth and not 'Gentile sinners' 16* *know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified. 17* *"If, while we seek to be justified in Christ, it becomes evident that we ourselves are sinners, does that mean that Christ promotes sin? Absolutely not! 18* *If I rebuild what I destroyed, I prove that I am a lawbreaker. 19* *For through the law I died to the law so that I might live for God. 20* *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. 21* *I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!"*

Encouragement following reading of Matthew 18:15-20 – especially vs.18-20

15 "If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over. **16** But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that 'every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.' **17** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector. **18** "I tell you the truth, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. **19** "Again, I tell you that if two of you on earth agree about anything you ask for, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. **20** For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

Let's start at vs.20: "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them." Jesus puts before our eyes an image: People coming together in His name. I hope a smile crept across your face as you heard that. We come together in Jesus' name [motioning to everyone sitting in church], and find... here is a place of rest in this world of turbulence.

Go a step further. What are these two or three (or more) gathering to do in Jesus' name? Finish the thought: We come together to... [pause for anticipated answers]

- Sing our praise to God. • Hear God speak His Word to us.
- Offer our prayers to him. • Enjoy some informal time together.

There are lots of possible answers to that question. Take the context of Matthew ch.18 in particular, and one activity deserves special mention. Many of the examples we just listed can be done when you are all by yourself. Jesus' words before and after vs.20 refer to an activity that requires at least two gathered in Jesus' name.

And the activity is so important! Why? Because when sinful people like you and me gather together and interact with one another, there are going to be times when one wrongs the other. What do we – people gathered in Jesus' name – do with that? What do we do then? That's what we've been talking about today.

That's what Jesus was talking about the day recorded in Matthew ch.18. In verses 10-14, just before our Gospel reading, Jesus tells of how... the Lord goes seeking one lost sheep. One of his people wanders. His fierce love moves him to act. He won't sit by and do nothing. He doesn't want even one of his fold to be lost. Then, right after the end of our lesson today at vs.20, Peter raises a question about: what you do when someone comes seeking forgiveness from you. Both of those, along with the rest of vs.15-20, share this ingredient: they address different aspects of what you & I do when a brother or sister in the faith falls into a sin.

Read vs.18 & 20.

We follow a regular path in Sunday worship and in life. We hold up God's law so that we can take a hard look into it – the ugly reality confronts us, of all the places our lives don't reflect God's will – we come to grips with our many sins – we come clean to each other and to our God as we confess those sins. We turn to God, trusting in Jesus for rescue. God's gospel message is shared: "In Jesus you have... the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace" (Ephesians 1:7). Go in peace. Offer yourselves to God. Honor God with your lives.

But what about when a barricade gets in the path? What I mean is: what about when one of us doesn't see or doesn't want to admit something they're doing is sin?

We lovingly reach out to them.

Let's do a comparison to a scenario from life. Which parents are acting in love? The ones who warn their child, even grab the child, to prevent the child from playing in the road; Or, the ones who, when the child runs into the street, don't step in – don't say a word – because they feel that would get in the way of the child's fun? [pause] It's ridiculous to even ask such a question.

And yet, when someone poses a similar type of question, you'll find people uncomfortably squirming - maybe non-committal. The question? Who is more loving: someone who quietly stands by as a fellow Christian runs, either unaware or knowingly-but-not-the-least-bit sorry, into a sin; Or, someone who "grabs" the person by speaking a warning of the danger they're in? It's obvious.

We've already heard two real life examples today (from the other Bible Readings: Ezekiel 33:7-11 & Galatians 2:11-21) - Ezekiel to his fellow Israelites & Paul to Peter (& others with him in Antioch).

We share love as we reach out to one another whenever the threat of sin is spotted.

It's our sinful self that squirms: "Not now. Later. Someone else can do it who is stronger. It'll be too uncomfortable. They'll probably go off. You can bet it'll end up costing me something."

Listen: Silence when love calls for sounding a warning is a sin. God made that clear to Ezekiel, in our Old Testament lesson: (vs.8) if "*you do not speak out to dissuade him... I will hold you accountable...*" (See Rev. 2:14-16, where such failure to warn is identified as sin.)

Who else is behind tempting you and me to inaction? Satan. He wants to lead a fallen brother or sister of ours to a state of denial. If they're not there yet, he wants to tempt them on to where they refuse to turn to God for forgiveness. Ultimately, he wants people's sins still bound to them, so that they end up where he is bound – in hell.

But you are not bound for that destination. Our God didn't stand by and do nothing at the sight of our sin – sins of inaction included. "*God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive the full rights of sons*" (Galatians ch.4). He firmly, directly and lovingly calls us to acknowledge our sin, and assures: "*If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. The blood of Jesus, God's Son, purifies us from all sin*" (1 John 1:9,7).

Here we are: two, three and more who come together in Jesus' name. We together confess our sins. We together hear: "Your sins are forgiven."

The certainty of that declaration comes from Jesus. Jesus said: "*whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*" How is that possible? Jesus said: "*where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.*"

Ah, we're back at Jesus' words in vs.20. Jesus, here, ties his presence to this important assurance: when we announce forgiveness to each other, as brothers and sisters in Christ, Jesus' power and authority backs that declaration.

Do you see the treasure? These are words of healing that can only occur where two or more are gathered in Jesus' name. I mean where one says: "I'm sorry." Another replies: "I forgive you. And... be assured: God forgives you – because of our Jesus."

May the Holy Spirit give us wisdom to see "serving as our brother's keeper" as a joy!