

Homily 9/6/26 - 15th Sunday after Pentecost.
Ezekiel 33:7–11, Romans 13:8–14,
Matthew 18:15–20

Now, O Lord, take my lips and speak through them; Take our minds and think through them; Take our hearts and set them on fire with love for Yourself. Amen.

Jesus Teaches about Conflict Resolution

Good morning.

Often we look for a common thread between all or at least two of the Sunday readings. Sometimes there isn't one but sometimes there is if you look hard for it. Today's one of those days.

We start with the reading from Ezekiel. Let me give you a little background. This reading was written in the period before Jerusalem falls for a second time to Nebuchadnezzar and the remaining Judeans are exiled to Babylon. Ten years before that Nebuchadnezzar had defeated Jerusalem and exiled part of the population. Ezekiel had been among the first group of exiles.

It is a time when the Judeans see themselves as having sinned so much so that there is no way that they can avoid punishment, no way that God can forgive them. God sends Ezekiel to tell them to abandon their evil ways and that by doing so they can return to God's good graces. While talking with Ezekiel God says to him that he, Ezekiel, is a "sentinel for the house of Israel" and he must warn them to change their ways. If he doesn't their blood will be on him. But if he does warn them and they choose not to heed his warning then their blood is on themselves.

Now there are two threads here that we can weave into the Matthew reading. The first is that God is being sinned against and instead of punishing with fire and brimstone, he takes the step of speaking, through Ezekiel, to those who are sinning telling them to change their ways. The second thread is that if sinners do change their ways they will be forgiven and included again among God's elect.

Before we turn our attention to Matthew however let's finish the story of Ezekiel and Judah. Nebuchadnezzar's forces do capture and destroy Jerusalem and exile most of the remaining inhabitants to Babylon. They stay there for 58 more years before they are allowed to return home but I think the most amazing part of the story is that after 58 years they or really their offspring march back to Jerusalem their faithfulness to God intact. The prophet Ezekiel played a major role in ensuring this faithfulness.

Turning to the gospel – The reading from Matthew takes place in the final year of Jesus's life, in a period when he is instructing his 12 disciples in great depth. This reading relates to dealing with conflict in a church, dealing with a church member who has sinned against another church member. Remember that this takes place before Christ's death and the church isn't really formed yet however there is a loose gathering of disciples and other believers and this is the context in which Jesus is instructing his disciples.

His Instructions are really fairly simple. He starts by saying, go and talk first in private to the brother or sister who is sinning against you.

Talking first in private gives the two parties an opportunity to sort out their disagreements and come to a mutual positive conclusion.

But Jesus continues if that doesn't work then next they are to take along one or two others - ones who are respected and will provide unbiased mediation - and discuss the situation with them present. Some scholars point out that there is a legal requirement within Judaic law defined in Deuteronomy which states "a single witness shall not suffice to convict a person of ... wrongdoing". (Deuteronomy 19:15). Bringing in one or two more people to mediate would have resonated with those early believers as an appropriate way to handle conflict. Finally if the person still refuses to listen then Jesus instructs that you should "tell it to the church". Now, this certainly doesn't mean bringing together the disciples and all those other believers - to call an all-member parish meeting - but rather go to the elders, to the leadership so that they may determine the best way to deal with this.

And then Jesus says if the individual continues in his sinful ways to treat him as you would a gentile (i.e., a pagan) or tax collector. Now that sounds pretty extreme. Would the church expel and shun that person - refuse to have any dealings with him? After all the gentiles and tax collectors were pretty poorly thought of. So expelling and shunning them might seem to be just what Jesus has in mind. It seems that way until we remember how Jesus dealt with tax collectors - the disciple Matthew himself was one- and how he dealt with Gentiles - sending Paul as apostle to the Gentiles.

Perhaps, treating them as tax collectors or Gentiles would include treating them with love and respect - leaving the door open for them to rejoin the community of believers if they changed their ways.

This is also the place where we hear the echo of God's instructions to Ezekiel. His instructions are to go and talk to

those who are sinning. Ensure that they have the opportunity to change their ways and to find forgiveness. So It was incumbent upon the individual who is being sinned against and the church to warn the sinner. If they didn't the sin was at least in part upon them. But if the sinner continued in his ways the sin was on him.

Jesus challenges each of us to speak openly in the face of disagreement and misunderstanding.

And that was as difficult to do then as it is now.

Does it strike you as surprising in this intense and important part of Jesus's ministry, just a year before his death, that he would stop to essentially give a talk on conflict resolution? We might bear in mind that Jesus knows that his time on earth will be short. Soon the 12 disciples and the other followers will be called upon to start a church in difficult times. Many of the people in that early church will have different backgrounds and ideas. Jesus leaves his followers with a guide for successfully dealing with conflict not by ignoring it or hiding it but by encouraging open discussion and respectful communication in a process that allows resolution at multiple points

And if you read Acts or the epistles of St. Paul you understand how important this guidance would be- just how much conflict they would face in the early church.

Jesus ends this passage by saying if two or three are gathered in my name I am there among them. This is Jesus's promise that as this process of reconciliation and understanding works its way Jesus will be there in that process.

What does this mean to us today in this church, in this community? I think it means have faith in God's way of working things out. God told Ezekiel, do not remain silent - point out to people their sins and Jesus says in Matthew - do not remain silent - work together prayerfully to resolve issues.

We often read that secrecy and silence breed darkness -dysfunction, anger and sorrow - in families and organizations. Today's gospel tells us that we must speak to our anger and our hurt before it harms our relationships or our communities.

You know you can sometimes read that same advice in the Dear Eric column in the newspaper (he's replaced Dear Ann and Dear Abby) - Maybe he too read Matthew ... pause...but the difference here is that our motivation is different. It is Christ who challenges us to behave in this way. This is part of how we follow Christ. As this morning's reading from Romans noted, "love one another for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law" (Romans 13:8).

Once you have read and thought about this gospel it can easily become part of your life. That old response that you might have had "well, I'll just sweep it under the rug" or perhaps "I'll just talk against him privately with our other friends" is no longer acceptable. Instead the gospel continues to challenge us to go and talk to the individual that you are in conflict with and to do that even though it is difficult. And the gospel promises that Christ will be with us throughout that discussion.

Amen