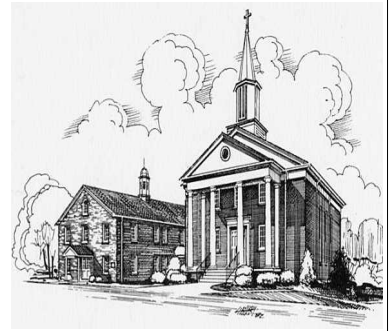


The Lessons Appointed for Use on the
Sunday closest to September 7

Proper 18

Year A

RCL



Ezekiel 33:7-11
Psalm 119:33-40
Matthew 18:15-20

The Collect

Grant us, O Lord, to trust in you with all our hearts;
for, as you always resist the proud who confide in their
own strength, so you never forsake those who make
their boast of your mercy; through Jesus Christ our
Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy
Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Ezekiel 33:7-11

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. 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. 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.

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 house of Israel?

Psalm 119:33-40 Page 766, BCP

Legem pone

- 33 Teach me, O LORD, the way of your statutes,
and I shall keep it to the end.
- 34 Give me understanding, and I shall keep your law;
I shall keep it with all my heart.
- 35 Make me go in the path of your commandments,
for that is my desire.
- 36 Incline my heart to your decrees
and not to unjust gain.
- 37 Turn my eyes from watching what is worthless;
give me life in your ways.
- 38 Fulfill your promise to your servant,
which you make to those who fear you.
- 39 Turn away the reproach which I dread,
because your judgments are good.
- 40 Behold, I long for your commandments;
in your righteousness preserve my life.

Matthew 18:15-20

Jesus said, “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. 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. 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. 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. 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. For

where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

SERMON

A very sleep-deprived and weary mother had just sat down on the couch to watch her favorite program when the sounds of pitched battle erupted from upstairs. She trudged upstairs, breathing threats and murder.

“Alright!”, she shouted as she separated the two small combatants. “Who started it this time?”

Through a quivering lower lip, one boy pointed an accusing finger at the other and wailed, “It all started when he hit me back!”

Every time I hear a news dispatch from the middle east, that’s exactly what goes through my mind – it all started when he hit me back. We could have few examples clearer than this exchange this week as yet another American journalist was beheaded:

Masked Murderer: “I'm back, Obama, and I'm back because of your arrogant foreign policy towards the Islamic State. Just as your missiles continue to strike our people, our knife will continue to strike the necks of your people.”

President Obama: “Those who make the mistake of harming Americans will learn that we will not forget ... that our reach is long and that justice will be served. Our objective is clear. That is to degrade and destroy (ISIS) so it's no longer a threat.”

It all started when he hit me back. Your evil action empowers me to visit evil upon you. An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth and never mind that shortly the whole world will be blind and toothless. I am entitled to visit evil upon you because my perception of you and your actions empower me to do so. That is the victory of evil over good acted out right before our eyes! Every

time we say, “He/She/It deserved it” in response to some terrible thing that has been done we lay a coin in the devil’s offering plate. We are fundamentally conflicted. Our loyalties are divided. Our minds are not clear. As an American, I want to shout, “You go, Mr. President! Blow the bad guys to hell and back.” As a Christian, I hear the voice of Walter Wink, a New Testament scholar:

I began to realize that if violence was my last resort, then I was still enmeshed in the belief that violence saves. And that meant that no matter how much I might object to any particular form of domination, I was still trusting domination and violence to bring about justice and peace.¹

There is something wrong with us, church. Something bred in the bone. Something the church has named “the

¹ *The Powers That Be* (Theology for a New Millennium) (Walter Wink)

Fall”. It is a deep and fatal flaw within our nature.

Here's the thing about evil in the world: Normally, nobody gets up in the morning and sets out to win one for the devil. Nobody, apart from the few psychopaths, puts “Do evil stuff” on their calendar for next Thursday. It's just naive to think that way. What really happens is that people get up in the morning and convince themselves that they are accomplishing something worthy, good, and even noble, then ignore the harm that results as either unimportant, entirely justified in the pursuit of good, or someone else's fault. Look at the cotton economy of the old South where people were provided housing and jobs, but at the cost of being owned by the plantation owner and utterly deprived of any human rights.

Or consider the example of one George Mortimer Pullman, the man who gave us the Pullman sleeper car.

To maximize his profits, he set upon the idea of constructing the ideal workforce, by which he meant a workforce in which every individual perfectly mirrored the qualities admired by George Mortimer Pullman. He even built the workers a town in which to live, named after himself of course, a town described by *Harper's* in 1885 in these terms:

“[w]hat is seen in a walk or drive through the streets is so pleasing to the eye that a woman’s first exclamation is certain to be, ‘Perfectly lovely!’ It is indeed a sight as rare as it is delightful. What might have been taken for a wealthy suburban town is given up to busy workers, who literally earn their bread in the sweat of their brow.”

Well, that sounds like a worthy undertaking, but *Harper's* continued in this fashion:

the idea of Pullman is un-American. It is a

nearer approach than anything the writer has seen to what appears to be the ideal of the great German Chancellor. It is not the American ideal. It is benevolent, well-wishing feudalism, which desires the happiness of the people, but in such way as shall please the authorities. One can not avoid thinking of the late Czar of Russia, Alexander II., to whom the welfare of his subjects was truly a matter of concern. He wanted them to be happy, but desired their happiness to proceed from him, in whom everything should centre.

It is said that Al Capone, when not murdering his rivals, was an ardent supporter of soup kitchens for the poor in Chicago. However much we might wish it to be otherwise, there seems to be no silver lining in anything we devise which doesn't harbor a fugitive dark cloud.

Each Sunday, we affirm that we who take the name of

Christ are called to confess the reality of sin in personal and common life. That's good. N. T. Wright notes:

Whether we are dealing with international relations or one-on-one personal relations, evil must be named and confronted. There must be no sliding around it, no attempt (whether for the sake of an easy life or in search of a quick fix) to pretend it wasn't so bad after all.²

But if that confession applies only to the mote in your brother's eye and ignores the log in your own, and if that confession then calls for the destruction of your brother, you have entered the devil's worship space, for, "Evil is the force of anti-creation, anti-life, the force which opposes and seeks to deface and destroy God's good world of space, time and matter, and above all God's image-bearing human creatures."³

² *Evil and the Justice of God* (N. T. Wright)

³ *Ibid.*

If we are to make any progress in dealing with the problems of our time, we need to rethink some things in the light of the teachings of Jesus. In particular, we need to rethink our understanding of the word “confront”. To our limited human understanding, to confront something is to either dominate it or destroy it. This is the devil’s due again. “Just as you cannot eliminate evil by act of Congress or by a philosophical argument, so you cannot do so with high explosives.”⁴ The recipients of your efforts will always name the evil you have done, never the good you intended, for it is you who have killed their children. If we are to move out of the devil’s worship space and into the broad light of God’s love, we are going to have to heal our ideas of justice and confrontation.

4 Ibid.

I've been quoting from N. T. Wright's book, *Evil and the Justice of God* for the last few minutes. N. T.

Wright is a retired Anglican bishop and a leading New Testament scholar. He is now Research Professor of New Testament and Early Christianity at St Mary's College in the University of St Andrews in Scotland, according to his Wikipedia entry. He's one of my favorite authors. His was the first voice that occurred to me as I read our passage today from Ezekiel.

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;

God's plan, as explained to Ezekiel, doesn't encompass the destruction of those who have committed evil. God's plan is one of reconciliation, not destruction.

Jesus said, “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. 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. 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.

Look at the lengths Jesus urges upon us to find reconciliation between two estranged church members! But even if there is no reconciliation to be found, Jesus says nothing about destroying the guilty party. He says only that we are to exclude such a one from the community.

How does that play out in practice? I know of a church which discovered that their long-time treasurer had stolen thousands of dollars from the church. Their

pastor was a gifted man and a scholar. He turned to our passage from Matthew and followed it, step by step. He pointed out her fault in private. He involved his church board. She acknowledged her sin. Arrangements were made to repay the money. When that all was accomplished, the offender and the pastor appeared together in front of the congregation, which received her confession then embraced her back into the community. Could you have pulled that off? I couldn't. I'm not that gifted. I might well have called 911. What a lot of evil that would have accomplished compared to the outcome this pastor shepherded! A reconciliation in place of estrangement. A healing of the community.

The forces that lead us to believe that justice and peace can be brought about through domination and violence have led us only to more domination and vio-

lence. Pope Francis reminds us:

“Adam, where are you?” (cf. Gen 3:9).

Where are you, o man? What have you come to? ...Who corrupted you? Who disfigured you? Who led you to presume that you are the master of good and evil? Who convinced you that you were god? Not only did you torture and kill your brothers and sisters, but you sacrificed them to yourself, because you made yourself a god.⁵

There’s something wrong with us, church. There is a deep and fatal flaw within us. We are informed by a flawed rubric that proceeds in this fashion: 1) Find who is at fault 2) destroy that one. God’s rubric is that told to Ezekiel:

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;

⁵ Pope Francis, 26 May 2014

We are witnesses to destruction. We are called to be agents of reconciliation. Can you do it, church?

AMEN

BENEDICTION

In Matthew's account of the arrest of Jesus, one of Jesus' companions drew a sword and attacked the servant of the high priest. You would think that Jesus would give room for simple self-defense, but this is what He said:

“Put your sword back in its place,” Jesus said to him, “for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?”⁶

Go in peace.

⁶ Matthew 26:52-54

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

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