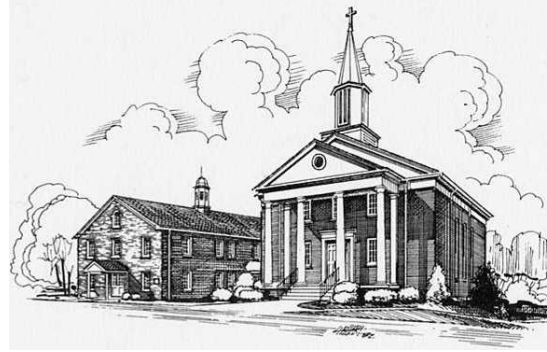


**The Lessons Appointed for Use  
on  
Proper 18**



**Year A  
RCL**

Ezekiel 33:7-11  
Romans 13:8-14

**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.* 1

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?

**Romans 13:8-14**

Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet”; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, “Love your neighbor as yourself.” Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let

us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

## SERMON

We hear a lot about crime and punishment, law and order, but what do these concepts look like when viewed through the lens of Christian teaching? Nearly 30 years hanging around the criminal courts gave me some time to think about crime and punishment, law and order. Let's take a look.

Criminal law has its place, obviously, in a well-ordered society to dissuade people from doing things that are harmful to the community. We would like people not to double park because it clogs up traffic. We could say, "Please don't double park" but you know that there are going to be people who reason, "I'll only be here a minute", do it anyway, and traffic gets clogged up. So we pass a

law that says that if you double park, you'll get fined. Actually, that works pretty well. You can pretty well depend on people acting in their own best interest, so we wondered if the same approach might also work for other things we'd like people not to do, like stealing, for instance? What if, should you steal, you have to restore what was stolen and pay a fine of twice what you stole. That should work as well as the double parking thing, wouldn't you think?

Well, if he didn't have \$100 to begin with, how is he going to get the money he needs to put himself right? I'd suggest he'll have to steal it, so this doesn't work. OK, how about a law that provides that if you steal, we get to do things to you which



would otherwise be unacceptable. We get to put you in a cage, and treat you disrespectfully, and take away your rights. There! That should fix it.

You can always depend that people will act in their own self-interest and who wants to be treated like that?

We didn't see it at first, but this idea brought with it a tiny crack of darkness, something we didn't intend. There's a dark side to all of us, though we don't much like to think about that. The victims of thefts, and the community at large, stopped thinking about the law in terms of something that dissuades people from doing things harmful to the community, and started seeing the punishment, the confinement and the contempt, as revenge and re-

venge is SO satisfying. Serves them right, these criminals! They're getting just what they deserve! As an added bonus, we can then think in terms of good guys and bad guys, making of ourselves the good guys. Though undertaken with the best of intentions, that of protecting the community, great harm has crept into the community, unseen and unperceived. Our taste for cruelty and selfishness has been given a reasonable-sounding justification. We're acting in self-defense against those who bring crime, those who bring drugs. They're rapists! What else can we do?

We have awakened our own demons, the same demons who directed the very conduct we wished to dissuade. And having awakened them, we find

we like our demons. It feels good to be in their company if we can convince ourselves that there is an acceptable reason to be there. After all, we're just making our society safer for all of us! What we need is law and order, and the way to insure that is to loose the dogs of war kenneled by our own demons!

Is there truly no other way? Paul wrote to the church at Rome in these terms:

The commandments, "You shall not commit adultery; You shall not murder; You shall not steal; You shall not covet"; and any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.

Our approach to law and order is BEHAV-

IORAL, focused on the behavior we wish to minimize. Paul's description is of something TRANSFORMATIONAL, focused on the child of God apart from the behavior. That's a really very different kettle of fish.

The weakness in our approach is that we allow the behavior to define the actor – those who do bad things are bad guys. The church sees us all as children of God, equally fallible, equally loved. Through the lens of Christian teaching, we can't say that the problem is these other guys because there ARE no other guys. There is only us, the children of God. This thought grinds the gears in the darker parts of our souls and we protest. We want to believe that there are evil people somewhere in-

sidiously committing evil deeds, and it is only necessary to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the church teaches that the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?<sup>1</sup>

It seems to me that we need to shift our focus from punishing behavior, with all its appeal to revenge and our human love of violence, to a transformational approach to our problems. We need to stop seeking vengeance and start seeking peace. That's not an easy sell. It seems too passive to address our fears. What we are overlooking is that peace-making does not mean passivity. It is the act of interrupting injustice without mirroring injus-

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Solzhenitsyn

tice, the act of disarming evil without destroying the evil-doer, the act of finding a third way that is neither fight nor flight but the careful, arduous pursuit of reconciliation and justice. It is about a revolution of love that is big enough to set both the oppressors and the oppressed free.<sup>2</sup>

I had the best conversation this week with a friend who is an addiction counselor and sometimes singer in certain churches locally. Wink, wink. I was telling her of my only experience with addiction – I never met a cigarette I didn't love. For decades, my life revolved around the obtaining and enjoying of cigarettes. Left to me, I'd still be addicted, but then came Kathy and with her, our pregnancy. Although my mind was filled with

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<sup>2</sup> Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals.

ways I could get around harming the baby with cigarette smoke without, you know, actually stopping, her quiet voice and assurance showed me how to step from the shadow of my addiction. That's when our friend said to me, "Yes. That's what we do in recovery. We recover the person from the addiction."

WOW! That's it! Through the lens of Christian teaching, we don't do battle with an addiction to defeat it; we seek to recover God's child from a shadow which obscures him and restore him to his proper purpose and life. We should not seek to destroy evil using the tools of evil; we should seek to bring our people from the shadows that hide them and restore them to God's purposes. That is what

we must face up to about our addiction to violence as a solution to our problems or we shall cause our own extinction.

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?

Why would we not adopt the same approach? Why do we seek punishment and the misery of the wicked rather than long for a time when they turn from their ways and live? We are demon-infested, all of us; only by recognizing our own sin may we turn from our ways and live.



**AMEN**

## BENEDICTION

Saint Paul continued:

Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

The Lord bless you and keep you;  
the Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you;  
the Lord lift up his countenance upon you, and give you peace.

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

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