**Weekend of Sunday, September 10, 2023**

**15th Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 23/Year A**

**First Reading: Ezekiel 33:7-11**

**Second Reading: Romans 13:8-14**

**Gospel Reading: Matthew 18:15-20**

**Sermon Title: *“Reconciliation, Love, & Unity: Building a Faithful Community”***

**Theme**

*Conflict is a part of relationships and life in community. Jesus’ words in today's gospel are often used in situations having to do with church discipline. The prophet Ezekiel tells of warning the wicked to turn from their ways, and Paul reminds us that love is the fulfilling of the law. We gather in the name of Christ, assured that he is present among us with gifts of peace and reconciliation.*

**Texts:**

**First Reading: Ezekiel 33:7-11**

*God appointed Ezekiel as a sentinel for the house of Israel. Ezekiel must faithfully convey God’s warnings to the people. Remarkably, God—who is about to attack Jerusalem—gives a warning with the hope that repentance will make the attack unnecessary.*

7So 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. 8If 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. 9But 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.  
  
 10Now 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?” 11Say 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?

**Second Reading: Romans 13:8-14**

*The obligation of Christians is to love one another and so fulfill the heart and goal of the law. Clothes make the person as we “put on the Lord Jesus Christ” and live today in light of the future God has in store for us.*

8Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. 9The 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.” 10Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.  
  
 11Besides 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; 12the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

**Gospel: Matthew 18:15-20**

*Jesus offers practical advice to his disciples on how individuals—and the church as a whole—should go about restoring relationships when one member has sinned against another.*

[Jesus said to the disciples:] 15“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. 16But 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. 17If 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. 18Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. 19Again, 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. 20For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.”

**Sermon**

Today, we will briefly delve into the three profound teachings provided by the lectionary because, in my opinion, these passages offer us invaluable insights into reconciliation, love, and the power of a united community of believers.

In the writing of the Old Testament Prophet, Ezekiel, we hear God's call to Ezekiel, nicknamed “the watchman.” His call is to warn the people when they stray from God's path. This passage reminds us of our responsibility to our brothers and sisters. How do you think that ministry was received in Ezekiel’s day? Not well. How do you think it is received in our day? Even today, we don’t like to be told how to live our lives, especially by our peers.

However, this passage indicates that we are called to be watchmen in our own families, congregations, and communities, *and* look out for one another, and if necessary, gently guide them back when they stumble. Do we do that? I don’t think we do it well. We may do it somewhat for the ones we love the most, family and friends but at great risk of alienating them. And I think we mostly practice avoidance everywhere else. In addiction this is called an “intervention,” but as we all know, an addict has to want to recover. No one can do it for them. It’s the same way with individuals or groups within families, congregations, and communities we see in unhealthy or inappropriate behavior. They have to want to change. That is the problem Ezekiel was confronted with, and the problem I think we want to avoid in our families, congregations, and communities.

The Gospel Reading is about dealing with conflict, which reminds me of a story I once heard. It deals with conflict in the church, and I am told this is a true story.

A congregation got a new pastor, whom the organist immediately disliked. Eventually, their conflict spilled out into the Sunday worship services.

The first week, the pastor preached about commitment and how we should dedicate our lives to serving one another. The organist led the song "I Shall Not Be Moved."

The second week, the pastor preached about tithing and how important it was for the congregation to contribute to the ministry. The organist led the song "Jesus Paid it All."

The third week, the pastor preached about gossiping and how we should all watch what we say about one another. The organist led the song "I Love to Tell the Story."

At this point, the pastor caught on. Embarrassed over how the organist's disdain for him was disrupting their services, he told the congregation the next week that he was thinking about resigning. The organist led the song "Oh, Why Not Tonight?" Joan, I don’t think that one is in the Lutheran hymnal.

And sure enough, the pastor did resign. In his farewell sermon the next week, he told the congregation that, as Jesus had called him to that congregation, Jesus was now calling him away from that congregation. The organist led the song "What a Friend We Have in Jesus."

We will likely have conflicts within our families, congregations, and communities from time to time. The local congregation, for example, is a small community. But I have good news! In Matthew, Jesus provides a blueprint for reconciliation within the Christian community. He encourages us to address conflicts privately, seeking resolution one-on-one between the people involved. But what if that doesn’t work, you ask? Jesus has an answer. If the conflict cannot be resolved between the involved parties, Jesus says we are to involve more members of the congregation, all with the goal of resolving the conflict and restoring the fellowship.

I have been involved in incidences where Jesus’s plan was employed and I have to tell you, the problems were resolved and the relationships restored. On the other hand, I have been aware of situations where a member of the congregation has disappeared and when I ask that person to tell me why they’ve disappeared, they’ve refused to talk about their upset and remained outside the fellowship of the congregation, and that is not a good thing for anyone.

When Jesus’s process works, it culminates in the power of collective prayer and agreement. It highlights the incredible strength of a unified Christian community. And just to be clear, by “unified” I don’t mean we all have to agree on what color the garage should be painted. That it needs to be maintained is enough.

In the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul emphasizes the centrality of love. Love is the fulfillment of the law, and it compels us to treat others with kindness and respect. This passage calls us to cast off darkness and put on the armor of light. As Christians, our lives should radiate the love of Christ, transforming us from the inside out. And if we radiate the love of Christ, that might help our interventions to be received well.

What can we learn from this triad of teachings? Ezekiel teaches us that it is our God-given duty to watch over one another, lovingly guiding each other back to God's path when needed. In Matthew, Jesus, our Lord underscores the importance of unity within our families, congregations, and communities, as we work together to reconcile, support, and pray for one another. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, reminds us that love is the essence of our Christian walk, dispelling darkness and shining God's light.

**Raisin’ the Bar Challenge**

So, how can we apply these lessons in our lives; in our families, congregations, and communities? I’m so glad you asked.

First, let us be vigilant watchmen for our brothers and sisters, loving them enough to *offer* guidance steeped in prayer and love.

Second, let us foster unity in our families, congregations, and communities, working through conflicts with prayer, love, and a shared commitment to God's purpose.

Finally, let us embody love in all our interactions, making it the driving force in our lives.

In conclusion, my friends, these passages remind us of the beauty of reconciliation, the power of love, and the strength of a united faith community. As we embrace these principles, we not only build stronger relationships within our families, congregations, and communities but we also become powerful witnesses to the transformative love of Jesus Christ in the world. Let us commit ourselves today to living out these values, for in doing so, we bring glory to God and bring His kingdom closer to our hearts and our world.

**Prayer**

From the beginning until now, loving God, we have turned away from you, following lesser ways, pursuing a lesser life than the life offered to us in Christ. Yet you will not abandon us. You call out, warning and wooing us to return to you. Even when we fall away from brothers and sisters in this congregation, you remain present with us. Help us to love as you love, wholeheartedly, until we are reconciled to you and our neighbor. In Christ’s name, we pray. Amen