

Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 18)

NOT JUST WHISTLING DIXIE!

Ezekiel 33:7-11

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Analysis by Marcus Felde

7 So 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?

DIAGNOSIS (in which the law of God speaks to what is wrong with us, the reason for it, and the consequences of it): “Sad to Say”

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *Wicked*

The drumbeat is “wicked.” Can we just assume everyone knows what he means? “Transgressions” and “sins” appear in the passage, to cover the bases.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Not Turning*

The text seems to skip from the presenting evidence (wickedness) to the dire consequence (death), without speaking about the problem inside sinners. But, since it is their “not turning” when warned which dooms the wicked (v. 9), we may infer that the real problem is not so much that people do wrong things but that *they don't listen when God warns them* (through agents).

Hmm. Seems the real problem is not what you did but who you don't listen to!

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Wasted*

“Our transgressions and our sins *weigh upon us and we waste away* because of them.” This is what the people have said to the one who speaks for God. Judgment goes with sin. But if we read the last sentence correctly, God turns the blame for judgment back upon the people themselves, asking (sarcastically?) “Why will you die, O house of Israel?” Brought up short by the sharp words from God, the people ask if there is a way out: “How then can we live?” (v. 10).

PROGNOSIS (in which the Gospel tells us what God has done for us and will do in and through us): “Glad to Say”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Here's How! (to*

Live)

We really must step into the New Testament to provide an adequate answer to the plaintive cry "How then can we live?" The good word comes in our Gospel reading, Matthew 18:15-20.

Do not think that Matthew simply parallels Ezekiel, as though old warning was transmuted into new warning. There is potent Gospel here! It has to do not with shaking our fists at "incorrigible church people," but with realizing the potency of the Word we now have in our midst (even two or three of us). No longer do we tell the wicked that they had better watch out or else. Now, a life-giver stands among us. Even though he was once *dead*. Now he *lives*. And so may *we*. We have the power to share this power with those who listen to the church, so that as we unbind them they become truly free.

Compare this with other passages like Matthew 16:19. These are passages in which Jesus stresses that we speak *for him*. That is, with authority. When we say to people, "Your sins are forgiven," we're not just whistlin' Dixie.

Yes, it says "whatever you bind," etc. Our forgiving and not forgiving is potent, but Jesus never actually bestows the power *not* to forgive. Seventy times seven. Let's see, didn't Jesus say "So my heavenly Father will also do to every one of you [cast you into prison etc.], if you do not forgive your brother or sister from your heart"? (Matthew 18:35)

I think it grieves our Lord that people think the church has some divine power to secure convictions and condemn. We were all using that power plenty, before Christ. Back to Good News! We don't just warn any more. Now, we have an announcement to make! Christ has arisen, and so shall we! This is how we shall live. Any and all of us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : Honestly!

As in the Ezekiel text, so in Matthew it all turns on the hearing/believing. We ourselves have been regained (v. 15 term) through hearing and believing. They shared, we heard, we thought not “They’re just whistling Dixie” but “They’re whistling *Dixit!*” [Sorry, a lame word play, I know. *Dixit* is Latin for “He has spoken.” Meaning God. God has spoken. When we heard the Gospel and believed, we believed because we were sure somehow that this liberating word was from the one who said “Let there be light!”] The law of God is spoken by people with authority, but even more and especially in the church, when we speak it is God speaking the word of forgiveness and peace.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *“Here we are, altogether as we sing our song, joyfully!”*

“Among” (Matt 18:20). “Regained” (Matt 18:15). “Agree” (Matt 18:19). “Gathered” (Matt 18:20). Words of peace and harmony, of the world restored by the mercy of God, through the forgiveness of sin—not by God lowering the bar and letting anything go, but through God’s commissioning and empowering the church. Not sentinel, per Ezekiel 33:7, but evangel.