

Weekly Reading – Monday, September 1, 2008

For many congregations this will be a kind of kick-off or homecoming Sunday as fall begins. Others will push that back a week to September 14. Either way, the gospel readings give us a focus on life in community, life with others that seems suitable for times of re-gathering after summer (and after those sometimes rugged extended family "vacations.")

Ezekiel 33: 7 – 11

The prophet as watchman and sentinel, announcing God's word of judgment and grace. Failing to give voice to God's word, the prophet becomes responsible for the fate of the people, the blood is on his hands. But if the prophet speaks as instructed the responsibility falls to the people who having heard, must now act on what they've heard. There are a couple of interesting themes here. One is our responsibility to and for one another, a theme that ties in well with the gospel text from Matthew as well as Romans. This is not a "You do your thing, I'll do mine," or a "Mind your own business" world. Here, we have an obligation to one another,. My business is woven in with yours, and vice-versa. But a second, and in some ways balancing theme, is responsibility for yourself, or the group for its self. I do have a responsibility to tell you (or us as a group) if you're screwing up, and you have such a responsibility to me. But acting on it and determining our fate and future is, according to Ezekiel, in our own hands. Verse 11, in particular, stresses this theme, that each of us has the capacity to make choices, choices that lead to life or to death, to blessing or to woe. Preachers could work with these two related themes as polarities to manage: responsibility to and for one another and responsibility for our own lives, fate and future. It's not an either/ or, but a both/ and. In some ways, candidate Obama has been seeking to hold these together: individual responsibility/ opportunity and mutual responsibility, as together the American idea and ideal.

Romans 13: 8 – 14

The lectionary skips over the rather famous first seven verses of the chapter on a Christian's obligations to the state. Verse 8 takes up where Ezekiel, above, leaves off: "Owe no one anything, except to love one another." Owe no one anything except everything! A Zen-like bit of paradox, that goes very nicely with Ezekiel's dual emphasis on individual responsibility and mutual responsibility. Paul's ethical injunctions, boiled down to "Love your neighbor as yourself," and then framed eschatologically by verses 11 - 14, which often appear as an Advent reading. Eschatology, the sense that the Lord is near and this age is soon enough to end is pretty much a way of saying, "Don't sweat the small stuff." Keep the big picture/ big themes in view. Keep things in perspective, and that perspective is "Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first became believers." Or as a favorite benediction puts it, "Life is short and we do not have much time to gladden the hearts of those with whom we walk the way. Therefore, be swift to love and make haste to be kind, in the the name of Jesus, our companion on the way."

Matthew 18: 15 – 20

In these verses Jesus lays out a process for processing or dealing with sin and hurt in the life of the community of faith. Again, the lesson balances individual and mutual responsibility. You can't make others change, but still we are bound up in this life together and we can't ignore one another either. The process moves step-wise, from direct one-to-one coming together, to bringing along a couple others to listen and verify, to bringing the matter to the community, to--if all else fails--ending the relationship. The process is a way of making "love of neighbor" (Romans) real, that is not sentimental but is direct and honest, and tough. No triangulation here! Note, that the process begins in an unexpected way. It's not the person who has committed the offense who takes the lead, but the one who has been sinned against. In other words, don't sit on your grievances, fuming about them. Take the lead and initiative, speak directly with the person who has offended you or done you wrong. I actually love this text. Overall, the point is to regain a lost relationship (not to prove yourself right). If that relational restoration theme is kept front and center, as opposed to "I'm right, you're wrong," God is glorified. This also helps explain the final, seemingly harsh note, "If the offender refuses to listen, let that one be to you as a Gentile or a tax collector." In other words, if a relationship is broken beyond repair, and you've tried multiple times to repair it, call it for what it is. Don't pretend to have a relationship when you don't! This week's texts really hit where people in the congregation live, namely, how do we live with one another, process inevitable hurt and offense, and restore broken relationships. Finally, the "Gentile and tax collector" line may be a sort of trick ending, as of course, Jesus went to the Gentiles and tax collectors! Have fun preachers. No really, I mean it. This is a great set of readings!