

Warn to Turn

Ezekiel 33:7-11 (NIV)

⁷ "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. ⁸ When I say to the wicked, 'You wicked person, you will surely die,' and you do not speak out to dissuade them from their ways, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. ⁹ But if you do warn the wicked person to turn from their ways and they do not do so, they will die for their sin, though you yourself will be saved. ¹⁰ "Son of man, say to the Israelites, 'This is what you are saying: "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?" ' ¹¹ Say to them, 'As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?'

Here's a big question that I've been thinking about for a few weeks: Is Christianity a consumer product? What I mean by that is: Do we come to church and follow Christ only because we get something out of it, that Christianity offers a product, so to speak, that I come and consume? I ask this because I know we use "selling points" when we talk about why we are here as Christians. "I come to church to hear what God has done for me." And we do; God's Word is primarily about what he has done for us. "I come to church because it's about believing in something bigger than myself." And it is. "I come to church because I need to hear that I'm forgiven and so that I can receive the Lord's Supper for that forgiveness." And you do. "I come to church so that I can know without a doubt that I am going to heaven and can look forward to a time when I no longer have pain or sorrow or crying or death." And, yes, you get that here from God. "I come to church to be encouraged and supported by fellow Christians because I feel like I'm outsider when it comes to what so many other people believe." You get that from coming to church as well.

We get all these things from being part of a church and gathering together around God's Word and his sacraments of Baptism and the Lord's Supper. But Christianity is more than a product that I purchase on Sunday mornings to make me feel good for a week until I can come back and purchase it again, as if going to church is no different than my weekly grocery shopping trip. Being a follower of Christ is also about the relationship you have with fellow Christians, which requires you to act at God's command.

We heard God call the Old Testament prophet Ezekiel to action, "Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me." (verse 7) Ezekiel was called to be a watchman. In his day, most people lived outside of the walls of a big city like Jerusalem. If danger threatened, if an army was heading toward the city, it was the watchman who first saw it and then sounded the warning trumpet so that everyone outside of the city could rush into the safety of the city walls. The watchman was more than a neighbor, more than someone who lived in the same place as these other people. His job was to protect his fellow citizens from harm, to basically save their lives by warning them.

We might be tempted to cast aside this call to action saying that the watchman job was given specifically to Ezekiel and not us. This was a job for the prophets...maybe the priests. So, really, in 21st century terms, this would be the pastor. That's his job, his responsibility, to warn people. Yet this call to warn is simply the relationship that God says exists among fellow believers. Jesus said, "If your brother or sister sins, go and point out their fault, just between the two of you." (Matthew 18:15a) God has called you, 21st century Christian, to action as his follower for the sake of your brother sis sister in Christ. If your fellow Christian, one of the people that you come to church with or who used to come to church with you, sins, you are called to warn them, to point out their sin, just between the two of you. You are to be their watchman, warning them of the dangers of sin.

What's the danger of sin anyway? God says, "You wicked person, you will surely die." (verse 8a) Death is the danger. Not just that you will one day eventually die, but spiritual death. Your brother or sister in Christ has been made alive by God through his Word and through the waters of Holy Baptism. This spiritual life that we enjoy as followers of Christ can be lost. We can die spiritually. One way to die spiritually is to actively and purposefully disobey God and turn away from him. It's the attitude that knows how God wants us to live and instead says, "I don't want to do that." This leads us to spiritual death because sin is separation from God. The more we sin, the more we push God aside and out of our lives.

Spiritual death can also happen by neglect. It's a much more passive hostility to God that says, "I don't need to be at a church or belong to a church to be a Christian." While we don't need the physical building of a church to belong to Christ, we do need to be fed and nourished by God's Word and his Holy Supper, to be constantly called to repentance, a turning away, from our neglect of his Word and our lives lived for him. We constantly need our sins removed because sin separates us from God. The only way that sin is removed is as we hear again and again of how Jesus lived perfectly for us and sacrificed himself to bring us to God. You may not

need the church building to follow Christ, but God calls his Church, his believers, into a relationship to watch out for one another, to call people back from both active and passive hostility to God, which is often shown by absenting oneself from regular worship. God calls us into a relationship to warn each other to turn away from wicked ways because if a person stays the course, they will die spiritually and be lost eternally.

Jesus gives us the pattern for doing this. When our brother or sister in Christ sins - and not necessarily sins against you, but simply sins - we are to go to them and point out their fault, just between the two of you. We are assuming that this is a private matter, and so we should handle it privately. After you try that - and probably more than once - you confront this person again, this time with other people who will warn them with you. They are there to confirm that this is a sin, that this is wrong, that this is tearing you apart from God, and that their sin will lead to spiritual death. And when they don't listen to the two or three people, you bring it to the church. You get the pastor and the elders involved. You try yet again to warn them of their impending spiritual death.

Is there any one of us here that enjoys confronting people with their sins? Let's admit it. We shy away from confrontation. We especially don't want to point out other people's sins because we anticipate the backlash. We cringe as we know that they are going to bring up all the bad things that I have done and condemn me for judging them. And really, who appointed me as judge over them? Well, God did. God called you to be a watchman to warn your brothers and sisters in Christ from following the way of sin that leads nowhere except to spiritual death. God called you to warn your fellow Christians by pointing out their sin and trying to talk them out of it. Yet, because we feel so uncomfortable with it, we neglect being a watchman. We back down. How many times have I failed to warn someone that what they were doing was sinful and leading them to their spiritual death? Am I guilty of not being the watchman that God has called me to be? Is there blood on my hands for sin that I did not confront?

This is how the Israelites felt in Ezekiel's day. They knew that they had neglected their role as the watchman by not warning people to turn away from their sin. The proof was all around them because now they were living in Babylon. Because of unchecked and unwarned sin, Jerusalem fell. The Temple was destroyed. Their people were lost. They felt the weight of the guilt for not being watchmen. "Our offenses and sins weigh us down, and we are wasting away because of them. How then can we live?" (verse 10)

They can live just as we can live. We can live because God has taken away your guilt. The blood on our hands has been drenched by the blood of Jesus, not to make us feel guilty, but to have his perfect cover us. He lived perfectly for you, standing in that place as the watchman, warning people of their sins, warning the Pharisees of their self-righteousness and lip service to God, warning Peter when Peter tried to dissuade Jesus from going to the cross, warning his disciples that night in the Garden of Gethsemane telling them to watch and pray so that they will not fall into temptation. Jesus served perfectly in our place as the watchman over all humanity. By his perfect life of obedience, he has perfected us even though we have failed to warn our brothers and sisters in Christ. God has washed you in the waters of Holy Baptism and made you clean, clothing you with Jesus' perfection. He has renewed you in his Supper, his body and his blood given and poured out for you for the forgiveness of your sins. He is the watchman we have so often failed to be, and that means that I deposit my guilt at his cross. That means that I can go forward to serve my fellow Christians as the watchman God has called me to be.

Yes, God has called you and me as watchmen over each other to warn people of their sins and to lead them to turn from their sin. But we don't just cry out warning; we also cry out life. Since Jesus' perfection covers our failures as watchmen, we go forward following God's attitude, that he wants all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?" (verse 11) We warn our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ of their sins so that they would turn from them and live. We serve as watchman not because of what we get out of it, but because of what our fellow Christians will get out of it, which is life. We serve as watchmen for our brothers and sisters in Christ because when we do the Holy Spirit goes to work on their hearts to achieve a turning from their sin, to achieve repentance. "If they listen to you, you have won them over," Jesus said. (Matthew 18:15b) And when that happens, we get to announce to them the forgiveness Christ won for us as our perfect substitute, that they have life, life lived in the full freedom of the forgiveness that comes only from God. God has called us into a relationship with our fellow Christians to turn them to life, for both their sake as well as ours.

So, my brothers and sisters in Christ, Christianity is more than a product that we consume. It's a relationship - a relationship with God and a relationship with one another. And relationships take work. God calls us to be watchman for our fellow believers. Warn them that they would turn from their sin and live for their sake as well as yours. Amen.