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MEETING PLACE - FIRST UNITED CHURCH Good

HEBREW
EPISTLE

EZEKIEL 33:7-9
ROMANS 13:8-10
MATT 18:15-17

Recorded Sept. 20 1981

Broadcast Sept. 27 1981

THE TALE OF SOME TEXTS THAT TRIED TO HAVE THE LAST WORD

When I became aware that our MEETING PLACE service would be broadcast on the 16th Sunday after Pentecost, and that the scripture lessons proposed for that Sunday were the ones we read, I WAS TAKEN HOLD OF. It got to me that the suggested readings put before us, some Biblical Material that I was not going to be able to tame.

Then I was trapped. -- Because here was a preaching task appropriate to the occasion. Granted the occasion has a variety of purposes - but they don't have to conflict. A central purpose is that we hear from God. Another purpose is that Canadians across the land are given the opportunity to join this people in the worship of God. Another purpose is to introduce a Canadian audience to this people and the God-- stuff that goes on here.

With all those purposes in mind what more appropriate preaching task, than to attempt to grapple with a WORD that won't stay put - that you can't fix - BUT THAT OVERWHELMS?

The readings appear at first to be straightforward enough.

Let's look at the EZEKIEL passage first. We find a description of the Preacher's Role - he is to be a WATCHMAN - and there follows a fairly neat set of rules or principles regarding the responsibility of that Role.

The Watchman is to hear the WORD from God and pass it on to the House of Israel. "And if God says to the wicked - you shall surely die and the watchman does not warn them so that they turn from their wicked ways - the wicked shall die and their blood will be required of the watchman.

But if the watchman does warn the wicked and they do not respond

- the wicked shall die -

But the watchman will have saved his life

or as the Elizabethans translate it - the watchman will have delivered his soul.

We might have an indication here of the ministry that is called for, from a church like ours in the downtown core of a Canadian city. The Role of WATCHMAN, the warner of the wicked to the end that they change their ways. One still has the problem of deciding who are the wicked - the drunks or the muggers or the pushers, or the pimps, landlords, developers, City Hall, Provincial Government, Bureaucrats, Multi-nationals. But once that was decided you would be assigned a fairly straightforward ministry - warn them of the wrath of God and so fulfil your responsibility before God. The epistle lesson also makes a point about fulfilling the Law of God.

"Owe no one anything - except to love one another - for he who loves his neighbor has fulfilled the Law. -

The commandments -

You shall not commit adultery

You shall not kill

You shall not steal

You shall not covet and any other commandments one summed up in one sen-

tence.

You shall love your neighbor as yourself!

The whole thing breaks down into one neat little sentence! You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Except the only thing neat about it is the sentence. What is the message? What is that - Loving your neighbor as yourself! What is that spelled out to in terms of everyday decisions?

For us here - the members of this congregation - our friends and neighbors - the staff of this mission in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver - What is loving our neighbors?

When a landlord wants to get rid of a tenant who is constantly drunk - violent when drunk, and victimizing all the other residents - what's the loving thing to do?

When people on social assistance consume their monthly cheque in one day's boozing - What is "loving your neighbor". When a large number of residents petition the Government to close the local liquor store because they feel that it is a way to remove chronic drunkenness from the street - What is loving your neighbor? What is called for when you feel that conditions in some hotels and rooming houses are so bad they are not fit for humans to live in - ? The rigid enforcement of standards to the point that you shut down all the places that don't comply. Now where do the poor people live?

There is a mother on social assistance with a grown son and a growing daughter. The son isn't making it economically and can afford to live only at home. He is crowding out the adolescent daughter who feels she is not getting a fair deal. What is loving your neighbor?

Does "love your neighbor" call for the rescuing of victims or the changing of conditions that victimize?

How we long for some rules - some guide-lines - something a little more concrete than "Love is the fulfillment of the Law!"

If you turn to the Bible for that kind of help it seems to be there. Biblical writers frequently undertake to spell out the implications of some noble profession into neat rules and guidelines.

The Ezekiel passage we read is one of them -- Interestingly enough - our Gospel lesson is another. In Matthew 18 we have some instructions to the early church as to how to deal with offending church members.

1. You take such a one aside privately, - if that doesn't work
2. You go to him or her with one or two others -
3. If that doesn't work you call in the whole church.
4. If that doesn't straighten things out - "LET HIM BE TO YOU as a Gentile and a TAX COLLECTOR."

That is a strange line to find in an early Christian document! Already we are in trouble. The rule doesn't fasten anything down - not when you take into consideration what Biblical writers say about Gentiles. The Apostle Paul might never have written a line if there had been nothing to say to the early Church about Gentiles. The whole section of Christian Scriptures for which Paul is responsible got written to make the point of God's INCLUSION of Gentiles. Nor will our rule stay fixed when you take into consideration Jesus' outstanding relationship to tax collectors. According to the official record one of the first things that accounted for Jesus' rejection was his inclusion of tax collectors. Popular as rule-making was to Biblical writers they don't seem to be able to succeed at it.

The Preacher Ezekiel is a wonderful case in point. This Prophet exercised his ministry just before and during the exile. The sentences from his writing which we read suggest that he was given this neat rule to do his ministry by. "Warn the wicked of the wrath of God" and you'll be in the clear. But in Chapters 2 and 3 the following instruction appears repeatedly -- "Son of Man you shall speak my words to them whether they hear or refuse to hear - for they are a rebellious house."

There it is -- There is firm expectation that they are not going to listen but that is irrelevant to the Call to get to the people with THUS SAYS THE LORD.

Chapter 20 of the Book of Ezekiel contains a striking re-write of the History of Israel as though God was reciting it. It's a sort of ISRAEL ACCORDING TO GOD. As God recites episode after episode in the history of this people he describes how they repeatedly ignored his ways and turned aside from his ordinances, and each time God says

Then I thought I would pour out my wrath upon them and make an end to them - But I withheld my hand and acted for the sake of my name.

Even the rule that the wrath of God will destroy the wicked - won't quite stay put. But in Chapter 22 we come upon the strangest line in the Book. After listing the faults in National life - Rulers, Priests, prophets and people God says

"And I sought for a man among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land that I should not destroy it - but I found none."

Now there's an overwhelming definition of Ministry!

I sought for one among them who should build up the wall and stand in the breach before me for the land that I should not destroy it.

What's called for here? -- Getting between God's wrath and a wicked nation so that God would not have to destroy it.

I don't know what you are going to make of that, but you cannot make it sound like "Warn the wicked and you are off the hook".

At FIRST UNITED CHURCH VANCOUVER we know something about the depth of the cry for RULES. The attrition is enormous whenever we let ourselves have any significant exposure to the community. We are committed to that! We declare that the way you come upon the ministry that's called for is to be exposed to the reality that is there. There is human traffic coming through here all the time. The door opens in the morning and in pours the street. But the attrition rate runs high and we find ourselves blocking off the exposures because you end up clueless and powerless about what's to be done.

We know something about the depth of the human cry for rules - GUIDE LINES PLEASE! Some clear things to do some clear places to go so that we can fulfil our obligations. Or "Perish the Word" - some priorities so that we can get to rest in the decisions we make.

Here at First Church we also know something else - we have found that no rule works for long - no accomplishment can vindicate the mission no guide line make any of our actual decisions for us. And on occasion we have found that that can be good news.

How else can it be like to have even the first fruits of a living relationship

with God but that all the rules become unstuck. How else can there be a living God in living relationship with us - unless it is to be by God's giving us to each other so that we continue to find out what that means - as long as we live.

What can turn the persistent and clueless bearing of the mess into good news - is to get a glimpse of what God is up to. Searching for someone to get between the wrath of God and the People - that they should not be destroyed.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God. How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways.

If you are going to be overwhelmed, this might prove to be a most blessed overwhelming.