

To Know God's Heart

September 6, 2020

St. Luke's United Church of Christ, Lititz, Pennsylvania

Pastor James Haun

Ezekiel 33:7-11

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. If 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. But 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.

Now 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?" Say 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?

At the heart of this day's lesson is Ezekiel's bold message: *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.* To be honest, most folks would not find this to be an especially bold message. *Everybody* knows that God loves us and does not want to punish! Isn't that message obvious to all? Isn't it an obsolete message? It seems that judgment and God's punishment went out with the Model T! Whichever television or media celebrities that may speak of spiritual matters, all affirm a very loving God and will lead their audiences in jeers against anyone who may speak of God ever judging or punishing. It would seem that Ezekiel's teaching is genuinely out of date and that we do not need to hear it. Or do we? Might we be missing something? Let us consider Ezekiel's day and his ministry and then look at our own times.

Ezekiel was a prophet during the exile of Judah to Babylon. He began his preaching in Babylon to a group of Jews who had been exiled there. As his ministry began, some had been exiled to Babylon, but Jerusalem was still standing and the complete exile had not yet happened. The prophet urged the exiles to repent of their sins and warned that Jerusalem would be destroyed, but his hearers thought otherwise. They were convinced that Jerusalem would not be destroyed and that they would soon return to their homeland. Ezekiel preached that a great judgment of God was coming and that

they would be punished for their sins, but the people of Judah were in complete denial. They would not accept his message.

Judah did maintain the Temple and engaged in many religious rites prescribed by Moses, but before the exile they had become a very idolatrous nation. Ezekiel's warnings of total destruction seemed far too extreme. By their way of thinking, they saw no harm in the other gods which they honored on the side, and rested secure in the knowledge that they had honored the Temple and done their basic Hebrew religious duties. They were also smug in the knowledge that they were God's chosen people. Gentiles might have to suffer God's wrath but not God's favorite nation! The people of Judah, both in Babylonian exile and back in Jerusalem, were in complete denial of any coming judgment, and up to this point in Ezekiel's book there is no mention at all of the Jews confessing to any sin.

But suddenly things changed! Israel's smug and self-assured attitude disappeared and they fell into despair! Ezekiel said, *Thus you have said: "Our transgressions and our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?"* What happened? Why this sudden change. Apparently, the evidence before them kept mounting and they finally realized their disobedience. It was a half dozen years into Ezekiel's ministry that the full destruction of Jerusalem happened, and this would demonstrate to the exiles that he was telling the truth. Judah's behavior reminds me of the addict who swings from denial—"I can quit anytime I want to. I'm in control of this"—to the deep despair of realizing their helplessness. Ezekiel had finally succeeded in communicating his initial message. Now that he had convinced the nation of their sin, he faced the new task of assuring them of their hope and God's rescue.

Judah's swing from complete self-assurance to despair may seem wild and strange, but it is really not so strange at all. We are familiar with such mood swings. As I had stated earlier, the popular belief among Americans is that God is a loving God who loves them and loves everybody, and any hint of judgment is out of the question. Outwardly it appears that we are happy and assured of God's love, but this assurance is not so strong as it first appears. People are generally uncomfortable when discussing spiritual matters. We avoid the quiet and always manage to fill our days with music, entertainment and other distractions, for we are uncomfortable to feel all alone. Might this speak of our basic discomfort with God? In our day many people who start new churches insist on keeping absolutely no Christian or religious symbols in or around their buildings. And what could be wrong with a cross, fish, baptismal or some other religious item being present? It is commonly argued that so many people have been traumatized by previous church experiences that they want to protect their people from any further emotional pain. This sounds like an awfully large amount of discomfort with God for a people who so readily assert that God is like a big loveable Teddy Bear! Beneath our glib affirmations there lies a great deal of discomfort and fear!

Ezekiel's new assignment is to convince Judah that God does truly love them and that God wants to restore 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?* How wonderfully blunt this prophetic exhortation is! God truly loves us and wants to see us rescued! Too often we think of God as a fault-finding divinity who is always looking for ways to criticize and condemn us. When I was a child my parents loyally watched the TV crime show *Perry Mason*. Perry Mason was a defense attorney who was usually working against Lt. Tragg from the police department. I cannot recall the name of the actor who played Lt. Tragg, but it was always amusing to watch his joyful gloating over the accused. "Well Perry, I guess this one is going to get the gas chamber!" he would say with great glee. For too many people, God is the great and eternal Lt. Tragg who longs to hold our sins against us, but in truth God is the Perry Mason who works tirelessly to set us free! God is pulling for us. Did Judah believe this? Do we believe this? Truth be told, there are many of us who feel very unloved.

Ezekiel calls us all to turn to God and live. Yes, that means to repent, and we have all kinds of negative notions of repentance. We think with deep and painful anguish over our misdeeds, and we may even think of God delighting in our sadness. But repentance is much better understood as a path to restoration. It is as though we are going into training for God. Just as a weak and unhealthy person may start eating right and exercising, so the repentant one ceases from the behaviors which harm their spirit and begins doing acts of service to God and others. God is pleading for us to live! *Turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel?*

God has prepared for each of us a road to life, and so we must be glad. Having said all that, Judah was also facing some very hard realities. They were in a distant place of exile and their homeland and temple were being destroyed. Even if they could accept God's forgiveness, the painful reality of exile and a destroyed homeland remained. We too can feel overwhelmed as the problems we face often suggest a long recovery time. But God's offer and plan stand. We are invited to salvation through Jesus Christ, and a life of rehabilitation as we enter the fellowship of the Church.

There are so many positives we can say and celebrate about God, and yet this message of God's grace is still a difficult one for the world to embrace. Why is that? The simple answer is that the world does not know God's heart. The world *thinks* it knows God and will become very defensive if we should challenge them, but the God they claim to know is a far cry from the One True God. When the world speaks of God it is usually as Creator, and many in the Church delight to echo this title for a number of reasons. God indeed *is* Creator as Genesis testifies, so the term has much accuracy. This is also a safe title for God to use in mixed company and many believe in some sort of creator god. By and large Creation is very beautiful and it also has a rather positive sound to call God Creator. There are, however, some real problems with the use of this title, especially as creation is so very full of suffering and killing. Nature has been called,

“red in tooth and claw,” and this does not immediately reflect well on the Creator. Others think less in terms of God as active Creator and more of the Greek notion of the first cause. However, this world was made, goes this line of thinking, there was a force or being who got it going, and we can call that force God. Others see God as only a moral ideal. The great problems with all these descriptions of God is that they all are impersonal. They present God as a force, and though largely as a positive force, God is seen as a power and not as a personality that can be addressed, engaged and loved. The world finds the term Creator as acceptable, and we can be too quick to go along and get along, but in doing so we fail to present the true and loving God. Rather than think only of an inoffensive way to tell of our God, we should be considering how our Lord spoke of God, and invited us to address the Almighty.

Here we are not reaching for a theologian’s deeply intellectual counsel, but are merely listening to the plain invitation of Jesus given in the Sermon on the Mount. *This, then, is how you should pray: Our Father in heaven.....* We are to call and to understand our God as Father. Sadly, this title has become surrounded by some controversy in our generation as many complain that it affirms patriarchy and all the abuses which have come from patriarchy in our history. Attempts have been made to replace the name Father with something less offensive to objectors, but the replacements have serious failings. The most notable method of avoiding the term Father is to instead use the title God.

The glory of the title Father is that it is a word which exudes a personal kind of love. God is not a mere cosmic force, nor is God a set of ideals and rules. God is a living being with personality, who longs to relate with humans that were created with personalities reflecting God’s. God wants to relate to us as Father! Perhaps my greatest heartache for young people and so many others in the Church is that too many have picked up a notion of God which is deeply impersonal and therefore fail to grasp the intensity of love and caring that our God has for us. I love to tell of when I was a very young man and was searching for meaning and direction in my life. Though I held some warm notions of God, by and large God seemed distant and impersonal. What shattered this misunderstanding was reading the Bible for myself, particularly the Gospels. When I came to Matthew 9:9, I saw Jesus, the Son of God, looking me in the face and offering a simple invitation: *Follow me*. Now *that* is personal! God was acting as no impersonal force or as a mere moral standard. God came the whole way from heaven at great cost and suffering to look lost people in the eye and lovingly offer them a place in God’s family! Mere Creators don’t do that. Jesus invites us to address God as Father, because that is who He is, and to see God as anything less is to shortchange the whole message of the Gospel.

We have a message of the true God to communicate, and we have our work cut out for us as this message is not always popular. The task has not gotten easier as the world drifts farther and farther from a biblical understanding. The Church says to the world, “God loves you!” The world yawns and responds “Big Deal! We already knew

that." Truth be told, they don't know that God loves them, and the world's susceptibility to fear and panic underlines that lack of true faith in their confident statements. Ezekiel's words to the exiled nation of Judah is not an obsolete message in our day. It is most timely. *Say 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?*