

TWENTY-THIRD SUNDAY IN ORDINARY TIME

LECTIONARY #127

READING I Ezekiel 33:7-9

A reading from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel

Thus says the LORD:

You, son of **man**, I have appointed **watchman** for the **house of Israel**;
when you **hear** me say **anything**, you shall **warn** them for me.
If I tell the **wicked**, "**O wicked one**, you shall **surely die**,"
and you **do not speak out** to **dissuade** the **wicked** from
his **way**,
the **wicked** shall **die** for his **guilt**,
but I will hold **you responsible** for his **death**.
But if you **warn** the **wicked**,
trying to **turn** him from his **way**,
and he **refuses** to **turn** from his **way**,
he shall **die** for his **guilt**,
but **you shall save yourself**.

Ezekiel = ee-ZEE-kee-uhl

An ominous reading in which God makes a challenging command. God speaks directly to the assembly through Ezekiel.

Slight pause between "you" and "responsible."

Emphasis on "you."

TO KEEP IN MIND

As you prepare your proclamation, make choices about what emotions need to be expressed. Some choices are evident from the text, but some are harder to discern. Understanding the context of the Scripture passage will help you decide.

READING I

The prophet Ezekiel experienced the forced exile of the Israelites by the Babylonians. During that time, he received his call by God to watch over Israel and to challenge the ways of the wicked. Ezekiel was one of the few Old Testament prophets who received his calling outside the land of Israel, which can shed light on his understanding of God's universal judgment—in Ezekiel, God judges not only the deeds of his chosen people but those of all the nations.

Foretelling of the impending destruction of Jerusalem, the voice of the Lord summons Ezekiel to be a "watchman" during the time of conflict. He is to provide a warning to the wicked to renounce their ways. Ezekiel is told quite clearly that failing to enact this task will result in his own demise. This is the second instance of Ezekiel being called to be a watchman and communicate God's message to those who sin, the first being in Ezekiel 3:17-21. The reading we hear today takes place after the prophet has called many nations to conversion and has prophesied the even-

tual restoration of Israel. Once again, like a trustworthy sentinel who is to protect the people, Ezekiel receives the call to address the ways of the wicked with challenging words. As watchman, Ezekiel is to make very clear the seriousness of failing to turn from evil in order to pursue the way of righteousness. While Israel has certainly suffered from their deportation to Babylon, they ought to be bolstered in God's care and concern for them by his placing such great responsibility in Ezekiel, a trustworthy and vigilant prophet.

For meditation and context:

The reading begins with a potent exhortation that shifts into a more subtle teaching.

The recitation of these commandments has a rote quality . . .

. . . which leads to this distillation of the wisdom of the Scriptures.

Even emphasis on "Love does no evil."

RESPONSORIAL PSALM Psalm 95:1-2, 6-7, 8-9 (8)

R. If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts.

Come, let us sing joyfully to the LORD;
let us acclaim the rock of our salvation.

Let us come into his presence
with thanksgiving;
let us joyfully sing psalms to him.

Come, let us bow down in worship;
let us kneel before the LORD who made us.

For he is our God,
and we are the people he shepherds,
the flock he guides.

Oh, that today you would hear his voice:
"Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,
as in the day of Massah in the desert,
where your fathers tempted me;
they tested me though they had seen
my works."

READING II Romans 13:8-10

A reading from the Letter of Saint Paul to the Romans

Brothers and sisters:

Owe **nothing to anyone**, except to **love one another**,
for the one who **loves another** has **fulfilled the law**.

The **commandments**, "You shall **not commit adultery**;
you shall **not kill**; you shall **not steal**; you shall **not covet**,"
and **whatever other commandment** there may be,
are **summed up** in this **saying, namely**,
"You shall **love your neighbor as yourself**."

Love does no evil to the neighbor;
hence, **love is the fulfillment** of the law.

READING II This reading on the commandment to love follows Paul's instruction to the Romans to obey the rule of civil authorities. Paul understands all civil authority as subject to the law of God. Thus, since God is the ultimate authority, obedience ought to be given to the law of the land since rupture in society is ultimately in conflict with the unity God desires.

Paul tells the Romans that the only debt they are to incur is "to love one another." While the foundation of Hebrew law is based on the command to avoid certain wrongdoings such as murder, theft,

and lust (see Exodus 20:13-17), Paul speaks of the law's foundation in a proactive manner. Love is not simply avoiding actions that are evil, but love involves moving outside of oneself in order to support the lives of others. The command to love in no means replaces the ancient law, but instead, it buffers it and demands more than mere passivity. In the next chapter, Paul will provide concrete examples as to how love unfolds in charitable outreach to others. We see him begin to explore this idea at the end of this reading by bringing together the law and the life of the Christian: "Love does

no evil to the neighbor; hence, love is the fulfillment of the law."

GOSPEL In the verses preceding today's Gospel passage, Jesus tells his disciples the parable of the lost sheep among the flock of one hundred. Great effort is expended by the caring shepherd who leaves the ninety-nine in order to seek out the one who has gone astray. Jesus then likens the Father to the shepherd who is vigilant in guarding his flock and making sure that none are lost.

GOSPEL Matthew 18:15–20

A reading from the holy Gospel according to Matthew

Jesus said to his disciples:

“If your **brother** sins **against** you,
go and **tell** him his **fault** between **you** and him **alone**.

If he **listens** to you, you have won **over** your **brother**.

If he **does not listen**,

take **one** or **two others** **along** with you,
so that ‘**every fact** may be **established**
on the **testimony** of **two** or **three witnesses**.’

If he **refuses** to **listen** to them, tell the **church**.

If he **refuses** to listen even to the **church**,

then **treat** him as you would a **Gentile** or a **tax collector**.

Amen, I say to you,

whatever you **bind** on **earth** shall be **bound** in **heaven**,
and **whatever** you **loose** on **earth** shall be **loosed** in **heaven**.

Again, amen, I say to you,

if **two** of you **agree** on **earth**

about **anything** for which they are to **pray**,

it shall be **granted** to them by my **heavenly Father**.

For where **two** or **three** are **gathered together** in my **name**,

there am I in the **midst** of them.”

A reading that demonstrates, in part, the way that Jesus sequences his thoughts, one following from another, building his argument.

Slight pause between “others” and “along.”

Note the parallel: bind-earth-bound-heaven
|| loose-earth-loosed-heaven.

Try to proclaim this familiar insistence as if saying these words for the first time.

It is in this context that we are to read today’s teaching on how disputes within the community are not to lead to permanent division but must be resolved through a process of forgiveness. Jesus tells his disciples that the first step in this process is to confront the one responsible for a “fault.” If this private encounter proves unsuccessful, several witnesses may assist in exposing the culpability of the one who denies his sin. The authority of the Church is to be consulted as a third option to correct the wrongdoing, and if this fails, the sinner is to be treated as “a Gentile or a tax collector.”

In other words, the person is to be treated as someone who is outside the faith of the Church.

All of this culminates in Jesus alluding to the ministry of reconciliation as carried out by the Church. The Church as a whole is given the authority to determine what sins are to be “bound” and “loosed.” This is an authority that was earlier handed over by Jesus to Peter alone (Matthew 16:19). Furthermore, Jesus concludes the instruction by ensuring his disciples of the efficacy of prayer and the importance of community. When two or more come together

to pray, they must believe that the Father will hear their prayer. The source of this confidence is found in the presence of the Lord in the midst of his assembled Church. Thus, in their ministry of forgiveness and in their petition of the Lord’s aid, the community of believers experiences the presence of Jesus in their midst. S.W.