

THE MESSAGE September 4, 2011
Ezekiel 33:7-11 & Matthew 18:15-20
Ezekiel...Repentance Leads to Reconciliation
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Tom and Dave were business partners and really good friends too. They were real estate investors who became extremely wealthy – flipping houses – buying run-down homes in foreclosure, fixing them up, and reselling them for a tidy profit. As the economy began to sour, they started this business as a way to keep low-income neighborhoods from deteriorating. Soon Tom became more focused on making bigger and bigger profits.

One day, he walks into the office all excited about a property he believes they can turn a \$50,000 or \$60,000 profit. He only needs to convince the appraiser to fudge the numbers a little bit, and get the inspector to ignore a few deficiencies. Tom doesn't notice the family being put out on the street. He had allowed his conscience to become calloused. He could no longer tell the difference between right and wrong, between business as usual and legal larceny.

Dave realized that something wasn't right. His parents face mounting hospital bills. Their finances were in peril, and they finally decided to sell their house. The painful part was... the property Tom was looking at to turn a hefty profit just happens to be Dave's parents' home.

Dave has a choice. He knows he has to speak with Tom. He knows he has to confront Tom. He knows it won't be easy. Tom is his friend and business partner. But these are his parents, and they're losing their home.

Dave goes to Tom reminding him of their compassionate beginning, how they started this business to help the needy, not to harm them. Dave reminds Tom about how they hoped to improve the neighborhood, not exploit it; how they hoped to make an honest living, not to use others as a means of gaining personal gain and wealth. And then, the moment of speaking the truth in love: Dave confronts Tom with his greed and self-absorption, with his lack of concern for others.

If you were Tom how would you respond?

Speaking words of confrontation, guidance, and course correction can be one of the most challenging things we ever do. Most of us don't enjoy it, no matter which side of the conflict we are on. It's risky. It's difficult. It's messy. It's necessary.

Whenever we tell someone they can't or shouldn't do something, it's usually interpreted as bad news. "You can't do this!" or "You shouldn't do that" often seems like a wet blanket of bad news. But is it? When a person's safety or wellbeing or the relationship is in jeopardy, we confront because we love.

Is it bad news to tell our children that they shouldn't play around a hot stove? No it isn't. They could get burned – seriously burned! We don't hesitate to confront them.

- We don't say, "Well, it's none of my business."
- We don't say, "If he really loved me, he wouldn't play with that pot of boiling spaghetti sauce."
- We don't say, "I guess she'll just have to learn the hard way."

No, we intervene. We jump in, we grab our children, and we pull them away from the hot stove. We say "No! Don't do that!"

We confront them for their behavior, not because we feel superior, not because we don't like them. We confront them because we love them. We don't want anything to harm them or they harm themselves or harm someone else.

Confrontation. Guidance. Course correction.

When was the last time you had to do that with someone? Did you hesitate? Did you follow through? Ever think you'd much rather eat shards of glass than confront someone for their behavior? I have!

More often than not we take the easy way. We avoid confronting others for their mis-behavior. And of course we have our reasons:

- "It's not that big of a deal."
- "I don't need to, it's not worth it."
- "I don't like confrontation."
- "If I just give it some time, it'll go away."
- "They'll never listen to me, anyway."
- "It won't really make any difference."

Sound familiar?

The prophet Ezekiel doesn't have that luxury. He doesn't have a choice. God calls him to be a messenger to the people of Israel, a spokesperson for God, a sentinel. It's not a job for the faint of heart. Yet, it is a call from God.

The book of Ezekiel tells his story. Born in 623 B.C. his father served in Jerusalem's temple where Ezekiel grows up destined to be a priest. It's a time of relative independence for Judah, with a constant threat of military overthrow by the oppressive Babylonian Empire. When Ezekiel is 26 years old, Jerusalem is attacked, occupied, and taken over by the Babylonians. Many of God's people, including Ezekiel and his family living in Jerusalem, are hauled off to Babylon to live as refugees in a region now part of Iraq. They're exiled for 30 years (593 and 563 B.C).

During that time Ezekiel is given a vision and called to speak God's message of judgment and correction, hope and promise, to the people who find themselves in dark and desperate times.

His words of caution, correction and clarity seem like “bad news.” But, coming from God, who loves the people and longs for them to live in hope and promise, these words of judgment are really good news... “If you touch the hot stove you’re going to get burned. Don’t touch the hot stove – and live!”

Ezekiel calls the people back to God. Because God loves them and God is faithful. He warns them that going their own way, doing their own thing, taking matters into their own hands, and they will suffer the consequences at the hands of a bigger and stronger superpower, Babylon. Sure enough – it happened.

In today’s reading, God holds Ezekiel responsible for speaking words of caution, correction and clarity to the people who find themselves in desperate and challenging times. Listen to what God tells Ezekiel to say to the people.

(Read Ezekiel 33:7-11)

Notice how the people take responsibility for their behavior and ask: *“Our sins weigh upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?”* Notice what God tells Ezekiel to say to them: *“As sure as I am the living God, I take no pleasure from the death of the wicked. I want the wicked to change their ways and live. Turn your life around! Change your way and live! Why die?”*

Question: How do these words speak to us today?

Notice the word “sentinel.” We don’t use that word, maybe we should. A sentinel is someone who warns, who speaks a word of caution, correction and clarity, someone who speaks the truth in love, offering a direction for life and redemption.

That’s why, in worship, we confess our brokenness in sin. We confess our inability to speak and act in ways that bring life. We confess that we live and interact with each other in ways that tend to create chaos and brings death.

When we become a sentinel for one another, when we weigh the cost of speaking the truth in love against the discomfort of conflict, when we speak words of confrontation, guidance, and course correction no matter what the cost, then we move into new life and redemption, and God’s Kingdom comes near.

A sentinel...

- Who is that person for you?
- Who speaks caution, correction, and clarity into your life?
- Who comes to you when you insist on going your own way, doing your own thing, taking matters into your own hands, and living in a way that is harmful to you and others?
- Who tells you when you’re getting way too close to a hot stove?

You might want to thank them. You might want to listen to them. You might want to see them as your Ezekiel, sent by God to save you from even more headaches, heartaches, and harm.

In our reading from Matthew this morning Jesus offers a 3 step process for this confrontation, guidance, course correction to happen.

(Read Text Matthew 18:15-20)

Jesus offers a three step process that looks like this.

1. *If a member sins against you, go and talk to that person privately.*
2. *If you aren't listened to, take one or two others along.*
3. *If that doesn't work, take it to the church.*

This is *not* how most communities function. This is *not* how most people operate. It's counter-cultural. Sadly – when someone sins against us especially in the church, most of us tell everyone *except* the person that offended us... “Do you know what so-and-so did to me/said to me? Well let me tell you. I am never speaking to them again...” When we do that we create an unhealthy triangle. What was a simple one-on-one conflict (often times a simple misunderstanding) now we've involves others, who are brought into the anger and now they fester about it too. We infect the whole community with our conflict.

Anger is like an infection. Communities that function like this constantly throb with unresolved conflict. I've discovered it's next to impossible to be a vibrant, life-giving community if we don't handle conflict in healthy ways. Jesus offers us a healthy way.

The solution is to go to the person privately. And when we do, nine times out of ten, we can resolve the conflict, and the community has not been dragged through the drama.

Notice whose responsibility it is to initiate the conversation? It says, “If a member of the church sins against you.” It's the person who is hurt, the person who is wronged who has the responsibility to initiate the action, not the other way around.

This is because sometimes, often times the offender does not even know that he or she has offended anyone. Jesus seems to understand that left unchecked, misunderstandings can morph into resentment, and resentment can turn into anger and anger can harden our hearts with hatred.

There's a better way. Say that with me... *There's a better way.* Say that again... *There's a better way.* Say that one more time... *There's a better way.*

Dave goes to Tom his friend and business partner and reminds him of their compassionate beginning, how they started this business to help the needy, not to harm them. Dave reminds Tom about how they hoped to improve the neighborhood, not exploit it; how they hoped to make an honest living, not to use others as a means of gaining personal gain or wealth. And then, the moment of speaking the truth in love: Dave confronts Tom with his greed and self-absorption, with his lack of concern for others.

Tom is struck to the heart. He doesn't fight it. He doesn't get defensive. He listens because he knows Dave is right. Tom knows that he has compromised his values and strayed away from the good he wants to do. He is deeply grateful that Dave was willing to step in and speak up saving Dave's parents from a fate they surely think is worse than death.

Tom is grateful that Dave spoke a word of caution for his thinking, correction for his behavior, and clarity for the future they will have together. Relationships are saved, lives are healed, and taste of the Kingdom of God was experienced.

Who is your Ezekiel? And/or for whom might you be an Ezekiel this week? Who is that one person in your life that needs some course correction? All of us can probably think of at least one person we should speak with... So why are you waiting?

In a few minutes we are going to share a meal of love and forgiveness from Jesus who offers a promise of reconciliation and new life in the bread and wine we share. Jesus provides a new way for us to live together in love and wholeness. I hope and pray this meal grant us the strength to live together as forgiven sinners, speaking the truth with words of love every day. Amen.