

“Things We Don’t Want To Hear That We Need To Hear”
Ezekiel 33:7–11; Romans 13:8–14; Matthew 18:15–20
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This would have been a good weekend for a preacher to take off, though I’m not sure anyone in this calling knows what a weekend is, we learn about that in retirement. But it’s a three-day weekend with Labor Day, a little extra time to rest, and if you’re off, you don’t have to deal with the biblical texts that show up in the lectionary today.

Some Sundays the challenge is that there are too many wonderful themes to address in multiple texts. How do we choose? Only with a great deal of prayer and reflection. Other Sundays, it is difficult to find anything helpful or hopeful in any of the texts. At first glance at least, this is one of these latter Sundays.

The prophet Ezekiel is called to confront wickedness and if he doesn’t let the people have it in no uncertain terms, he will be punished with them. There is even talk of blood on his hands. In the reading from Romans, the Apostle Paul briefly mentions love but spends more time talking about adultery, murder, theft, reveling and drunkenness, illicit sex or debauchery in other translations and licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy. Every deacon loves reading this text! Then, in the reading from Matthew, Jesus talks about conflict among his followers, when one sins against another, and how to respond to this. It’s just one happy story after another. Where is the good news here?

Yet while we might all want to shy away from texts like these, perhaps pay attention to the glimmer of hope each has and move on, there is value in trying to hear the more difficult parts of these passages. God tells Ezekiel the Divine hope is that people will repent and not be punished, Paul says love is the ultimate purpose of the law, and Jesus wants people in conflict to reconcile, but to experience these good things, people must recognize where they are falling short and change.

It’s a bit like dog training. The best training always emphasizes positive things, making it clear what we want from our canine friends and rewarding them when they do it. We don’t want to be too negative, but as with children, we sometimes have to use a difficult word — no. A toddler who never hears the word “no” will present greater challenges in adolescence. A puppy who is never corrected will be a much greater challenge as a dog, especially if the dog is a German

Shepherd like ours. “I don’t mind him jumping on me,” some people will say about the cute little thing, to which we respond, “You will when he is 100 pounds!”

Life and faith are like this. We are wise to focus on the good and noble to which we aspire, but to get there we sometimes have to acknowledge things that are getting in the way. There are things we don’t want to hear that we need to hear, a lot of them in the Bible. What kinds of messages like this might our texts today have to proclaim if we are willing to listen?

Some of these messages are intensely personal. They concern issues like those Paul names as being obstacles to love — excessive drinking or irresponsible sexual behavior, coveting and stealing, quarreling and jealousy. Some of these behaviors are near the top of our “no-no” list; in fact, we don’t even want to talk about them, in church... while others we dismiss — we quarrel and covet things often. Paul includes them all in this list of barriers to love. Anything that gets in the way of us pursuing Christlike love for others and our own best selves is to be avoided. This makes sense, but it can still be difficult to hear.

In the tenth season of the British drama series “Grantchester,” in which vicars help a local detective solve murders, a former curate develops a drinking problem, and the people closest to him at first recognize it but don’t confront him, until eventually they do, after he is arrested for disorderly conduct. As it turns out, the trigger for his struggle is the combination of his partner going away and his father dying. He wasn’t close to his father because his father never showed him any love, largely because he was gay, but this only adds to his grief.

So, there are underlying issues, as there often are, but avoiding any confrontation about the presenting problem is not helpful. Leonard — the character’s name — doesn’t need harsh judgment, he needs compassion, but compassion that is honest enough about his alcohol abuse to uncover the source of his pain. Leonard doesn’t respond well to confrontation at first, he is defensive, but over time he hears what he needs to hear.

There are many other personal issues that can get in the way of our love, love that does no wrong to a neighbor, according to Paul. Anger and jealousy, a long list of biases and prejudices, excessive self-interest or callous insensitivity toward others. If someone confronts us about any of these issues, or if we begin to recognize something unattractive in ourselves, we may at first feel defensive. “I’m not racist!” we may insist. But in the end, we are wise if we try to listen more deeply.

Paul also talks about making no provision for the flesh, but we need to hear this admonition in context. Paul does not embrace a dualistic view of humankind wherein anything physical is evil and thus opposed to the spiritual. That view fits ancient Greek thought but not Christian thought. Paul uses these categories to talk about behavior that is shaped by love and goodness, all that God desires, the ways of the spirit; and behavior that is harmful and destructive, the ways of the flesh. God created the physical world, physical desires are not evil in and of themselves, it's what we do with them that matters, that we act in love.

But not all the difficult messages we need to hear are personal, some, in fact, many in the Bible, are prophetic. They're about more than individual piety. They are social and systemic in focus. While they are not linked solely to the prophetic books of scripture — in fact, much of Jesus' ministry has social and political implications — among today's texts, the reading from Ezekiel falls most directly into this category.

The text says God has made Ezekiel a sentinel for the house of Israel, a guard who is keeping watch. He is in exile with many others in Babylon. They have struggled to take responsibility for what has happened. Because of their unfaithfulness, God has abandoned them to the consequences of their own decisions. Thus, the Babylonians have conquered them, Jerusalem has fallen, and they are downcast. Ezekiel's unpleasant responsibility is to warn the people of how they are drifting further away from God, withering as if they have a terminal illness.

As always, the unfaithfulness involves a combination of two things — their relationship with God and their relationship with each other. They have taken God for granted, at first thought they could make it on their own, then given up on God's help; and they have mistreated the poor and vulnerable, turning the justice system into a vehicle of oppression. Thus, God sees them as wicked people who will die, not just as individuals but as a nation. There is hope if they will turn from their evil ways, this is what God desires, but they must turn.

Other prophets speak to different specific concerns, but they all tend to center around the same two basic issues — the love of God and the love of neighbor — and the two loves are intertwined. Those who love God love their neighbor, 1 John 4 echoes this theme, and while love is expressed on an individual level, it is also expressed on a social level.

We cannot love a neighbor who is hungry without being willing to share food with our neighbor but nor can we love that neighbor while contributing to practices that make it difficult for them to make ends meet. We welcome the stranger, the

immigrant, personally to our clothing ministry or church or community through a Welcome House, but we also welcome the stranger by opposing illegal practices toward immigrants with CBF and working for a more compassionate response through our involvement with the Wake Interfaith Immigration Network.

Of course, this is why many people do not want to hear anything that falls into the prophetic realm. In the church especially, we grow anxious with issues and concerns that bump up against the political. But every public issue grows out of a personal concern and God is sovereign over all the world, not just individual lives. We need to avoid partisan actions in the church and respect different perspectives, but there are prophetic words we need to hear for our own spiritual wellbeing and the good of the community, nation, and world in which we live.

So, there are personal and prophetic messages we need to hear, and then, there are messages about conflict. This is what Jesus is talking about in the reading from Matthew. We'd rather not talk about it. We know human beings disagree, even in the church, but we prefer to make nice, not draw attention to our tensions. But conflict left unattended rarely goes away, anger repressed is not anger gone, rather we simply store up our feelings for a rainy day when we rain all over someone else!

During a break at a conference where psychologist William Miller was speaking about the importance of getting in touch with our darker feelings, a nicely dressed woman approached him with a smile, saying, "I find this all very interesting, but the truth is I do not have any dark feelings." Before Miller could respond, a man walked up to her and said, "Honey, I'm going home," and the woman began to frown.

"Do you know who that was?" she asked. Miller said, "Your husband, I assume." "Do you know where he is going?" she asked. "I assume home," said Miller. "Do you know what he's going to do? He's going to sit in that stupid chair in front of that stupid television and drink that stupid can of beer while he watches that stupid ballgame!" "Really?" said William Miller. "He sits in that stupid chair and watches that stupid ballgame when I have a meal ready and he says, 'Just one more play, honey, just one more play.' It makes me so mad! Do you know what I'm going to do?! One day I'm going to walk into that room and take that can of beer out of his hand and pour it over his head and..." She stopped here because everyone was listening to her. Anger doesn't just go away.

Jesus recommends engaging our differences, especially in the church, and seeking to resolve them. These few verses should not be viewed as a formula. There are times when more sensitivity is required. But making sure we don't let our

feelings fester is essential not only to our personal wellbeing but to community health as well.

A judge in another setting was called in to moderate a meeting at a church where conflict had grown out of control. When he walked into the packed sanctuary, first the pastor and then the deacon chair, leaders of the rival parties, asked to have the opening prayer. Realizing neither was going to be talking to God, the judge said, “Fellas, there won’t be any prayer today.” Not all conflict gets to this level, but it stirs under the surface, whether we realize it or not, and ultimately comes out.

Anger does not usually go away on its own. Conflict unattended often grows. Jesus suggests that we work out our problems, with help if we need it. It too is a word we need to hear.

When Robert Schuller started what became the Crystal Cathedral, he did a massive door-to-door survey asking people two questions. What do you need most that a church could help with and what do you never want to hear? He then shaped his ministry around the responses, and it was quite successful. Needs were addressed, which was wonderful, but certain subjects were avoided, which was at times problematic. For example, even in Lent, every message and all the music had to be upbeat. How do you even talk about the cross?

Closing our ears to difficult truths may ease our discomfort in the moment, but it only serves to make life more difficult in the long run. There are messages we don’t want to hear that we need to hear. In the words of the Shaker song, there are times when the house needs to be swept clean. May we find the courage to allow God to do so!