

# Homily for the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Times

September 9-10, 2017

Readings: Ezekiel 33: 7-9; Romans 13: 8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

Preacher: Rev. Paul English

“Good evening, Mr. Phelps,” the TV show began back in 1966, “Your mission, should you choose to accept it...” always led to an exciting episode that pitted amazing agents against situations too difficult for anyone else to crack. “Mission: Impossible.”

The prophet Ezekiel receives a daunting mission today. He is to use his wisdom and foresight to recognize when his nation is moving toward disaster and ruin, not so that he can feel superior, but in order to reach out to them with a family member’s love and give them a message they surely do not want to hear. “Go that way and you’re going to perish.”

It seems that God anticipates Ezekiel’s innermost thoughts, saying, “If you don’t speak this warning, I will hold you responsible for their death.” On the other hand, “If you warn them and they persist, sadly they’ll die but it won’t be your fault, Ezekiel.”

This isn’t a simple case of some random person warning an unknown group; it’s a family member showing deep concern for the rest of the family, all of whom are in dreadful danger. In a word, he loves them. He wants them to live, to be well. Except for the case of the prophet Jonah, I’ve never heard of prophets of Israel hoping for the evil they are warning about to befall their hearers. Why? Because like Ezekiel, the prophets were about two loves: complete love for God and loving their own Israelite family with all their heart.

Saint Paul counsels the believers in Rome to live lives completely given to love in the same way, love of God and of one’s neighbors, because, far from doing evil to the neighbor, love seeks the wellbeing of all with utter generosity and energy. Paul instructs that community of believers to interact with one another from a stance of love and to leave all else outside the door.

Think about that for a moment, will you? Interact with everyone, no exceptions, with love, desiring only the greatest good for them, ultimately desiring first and foremost their salvation.

Now review the screen in your mind of those people who have annoyed you, hurt you, betrayed your trust, done a terrible job of being a public servant in the past week. Your mission and mine, should we choose to accept it, is first and foremost to desire those people's salvation; in a word to love them as Jesus does. Jesus, who prayed "Forgive them, for they know not what they do." Love them with a love that moves us to warn them in the sincerest and most persuasive way to turn away from the present course of action, which will bring about their own destruction and bring down many others with them. Why? Because even though we surely dislike it, these people are our family, and are already loved by God!

The early Church must have run into recalcitrant brothers and sisters, else they would not have recalled so distinctly the teaching of Jesus in this regard. He was clear on this. If someone you care for sins against you, talk it out, lay it on the table. The hope is that you'll heal the offense and still love each other. If one-on-one doesn't work, take another who shares the same desire for peace. If that isn't successful, get the community's prayer and reconciliation involved. That's amazingly powerful intervention. Surely being surrounded with all that loving concern would turn the heart of someone who already loves you.

"But" Jesus says, "if he refuses to listen to all of you, treat him as you would a Gentile or a tax collector." Many people take this as the "out," sort of like the instructions Ezekiel received: "But, if you warn the wicked... and he refuses to turn from his way, he shall die for his guilt but you shall save yourself." But many would be wrong. This is not the way of Jesus. Think about it! It was St. Matthew who wrote this Gospel. He was a tax collector. Further, what was Jesus attitude toward gentiles? See the Samaritan woman at the well or the Good Samaritan or the Roman commander, all of whom he treated with admiration, kindness, love. "Your mission, should you choose to accept it..." is not to give up even on the recalcitrant, but to love them, even if we would never do what they do.

Jesus says, "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst." This is no magic formula for conjuring up Jesus (gathering in two or three or more like a seance); it's about hearts agreeing to forgive – it's about Jesus

being present in our accepting the daily mission to forgive, to reconcile, to unite, so that one day we will be united with Christ and the Father and the Holy Spirit and all the holy ones forever.

This is all about forgiving. This is all about looking to our common mission, the plan God has for our unity, our being one body, our being Christ, and choosing to accept that mission despite the seeming impossibility. Lives depend on it. Our loving God is leading us. We have nothing to fear.