
WORD MADE FLESH

Twenty-third Sunday in Ordinary Time
Ezekiel 33:7-9; Romans 13:8-10; Matthew 18:15-20

"Harden Not Your Heart"*

Commandment speaking to commandment. All commandments, their whole point and purpose 'summed up in this word, "Love your neighbour as yourself.'" Not to recognize the entrance of estrangement into the life we have together with each other is to miss or ignore the entrance of estrangement into our soul. How easy it is to listen to the readings for this ordinary time and draw from them the injunction to judge and discipline. Whole Christian traditions have been based on such readings of Ezekiel and today's Gospel. The reading from Ezekiel sounds at first flush as an injunction to spare oneself the complicity that comes from indulging the sins of others, complicity because we did not sound the warning and seek to draw our brothers and sisters back into the presence of God, the giver and lover of life.

In the Gospel Jesus reflects with his disciples saying, 'If your brother or sister sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the brother or sister listens to you, you have regained that one. But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you...if the brother or sister refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church...if the offender refuses to listen...let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.'

These are texts often taken to be about community discipline. "Church" in the Gospel text is that lovely Greek word, "ekklesia," "gathered community." So we read it again. If our sister or brother sins against us, drives a wedge of estrangement into our ekklesia, it brings the death of our communion. Our struggle together in the world, a struggle to "put on Christ" and grow into the fullness of communing love, will wither and die. There is no room for righteous indignation here. Recognizing the loss of communion gives birth to sorrow, not indignation. The struggle that ensues is for reconciliation, not judgement or denunciation.

The texts are speaking to us of sin not from moral principle, from abstract rules and regulations. Rather, they speak concretely of that experience which banishes the Presence from our midst. We are to be "bound" together as the Gospel concludes; or, in the words of a parallel Hebrew text, sitting "together occupied in the Law having the Presence among us." And so the Gospel Acclamation is sung: "God was in Christ, to reconcile the world to himself; and the good news of reconciliation he has entrusted to us." The discipline in the ekklesia, in the community of God's people, is grounded and circumscribed by reconciliation. It is the community that comes to be when we love our neighbour as ourselves.

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