Guarding God’s People

THE FIRST READING

Enemies without

Ancient cities had watchmen on the city walls who would blow a trumpet if they saw an enemy approaching. If people ignored the warning, the city might be conquered, but this wasn’t the watchman’s fault. If a watchman failed to warn people of danger, however, the blame was his.

Enemies within

As watchman, Ezekiel isn’t to look for enemies coming from outside Israel but from within it. When Israel hears the prophet’s warning, the nation should prepare to battle not its enemies but its own sin.

The penalty Ezekiel faces if he fails to warn God’s people is as severe as the penalty the people face: death. The penalty might reinforce the idea of a harsh Old Testament God, but God calls Ezekiel to be a watchman so that people will turn away from sin and be saved.

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

—Romans 13:10

by Edrianne Ezell | oursundayreadings.wordpress.com | eezell3@gmail.com
MATTHEW 18:15-20

Reading closely
1. What would count as a serious sin that should be addressed within the Christian community?
2. What effect might serious sin have on a Christian community?
3. What would make this process effective?
4. What would make this process ineffective?
5. How might a whole community help a serious sinner?
6. What might treat him as you would a Gentile or tax collector look like?
7. What do you think are the differences between the authority given to Peter (16:18-19) and the authority given here to the church?
8. What does this passage reveal about the early church?

Living the word
9. Have you ever seen this procedure used? What was the outcome?
10. Would you follow this procedure if you saw the need? Why/Why not?

THE GOSPEL READING

Clear guidelines
In the fourth book or section of Matthew’s Gospel Jesus tackles the problem of sin within the Christian community. In this passage he outlines a procedure for dealing with individual Christians who are committing a serious sin. The procedure comes from Judaism.

☐ Step 1: Talk with the person privately.
☐ Step 2: Talk with the person in the presence of 1-2 other people who can both confirm the points you’re making and hear the other person’s response.
☐ Step 3: Bring the matter to the attention of the whole community. If the person still refuses to repent, exclude him/her from the community.

Serious sin makes the whole community look bad and can lead others to sin. This three-step procedure protects the community and gives the serious sinner every possible chance to change.

Avoiding hypocrisy
Those who talk with the sinner must do so prayerfully and with love. Jesus takes a harsh stance against hypocrisy (Mt 23). He also warns us to vigorously root out sin from our own lives (18:6-9).

Like a Gentile or tax collector
Jews tried to keep apart from Gentiles (non-Jews) and tax collectors, who raised money for Rome, their foreign conqueror. Because Jesus reached out to people who felt unloved and excluded, he probably doesn’t mean that he wants sinners to be ignored or treated meanly.

Authority
In Jewish tradition it was said that when two devout Jews gathered to reflect on God’s law, God was with them. Jesus adapts this familiar saying to assure his church that when they follow the proper procedures humbly and prayerfully, he will uphold their decision.

Excommunication
Excommunication is the penalty in canon law (the Catholic Church’s legal system) for sins like renouncing one’s faith or causing schism. Someone who’s excommunicated isn’t allowed to participate in aspects of Church life like the Eucharist. The penalty of excommunication can be lifted through the Sacrament of Penance and, in more public cases, through a formal statement.

PRAYER

Lord Jesus,
today let us hear your voice;
open our hearts to your love.
When we sin, help us to admit it.
When we persist in sin,
give us the strength and wisdom to ask for help.
When someone points out our sin,
humble us to receive correction.
When we must point out someone else’s sin,
help us speak with gentleness and love.
Today let us hear your voice;
open our hearts to your love.
We ask this in your holy name. Amen.