

Goal: That the hearers would lovingly confront sin and restore one another in Christ.

Two weeks ago hurricane Irene hit the east coast. Thankfully, by the time it made it to the northeast it had weakened to a tropical depression and the fears of a repeat of Katrina were not realized. Why? Well in part, because millions of people had evacuated the region. Meteorologists had carefully watched Irene's path and sounded the warning. And this time, with Katrina in their memories, the people heeded the warning.

In sounding the warning, the weathermen and government officials were playing the part of an ancient watchman. Back in the days of Ezekiel, the Israelites depended on the watchman. During war, the watchman's duty was to sound the alarm when the enemy was approaching. He was to blow the trumpet so that the city residents could get inside the city walls and prepare for battle. If any man disregarded the warning, he was signing his own death warrant, but no blame would be attached to the watchman. However, if the watchman didn't sound the warning, he'd be held responsible for the deaths of those surprised by the enemy.

But God called Ezekiel to be a different kind watchman. He was called to be a spiritual watchman, one who would point out a different enemy, the people's sins. He must have had the most unpopular and thankless job in all of Israel! But God calls him, ***"You, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from his way, that wicked person shall die in his iniquity, but his blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from his way, and he does not turn from his way, that person shall die in his iniquity, but you will have delivered your soul. (Ezekiel 33: 7 – 9)*** That sounds pretty harsh. But it's true.

Why does God appoint a watchman to warn people of their sins? It's because he uses human agents like prophets and apostles to faithfully deliver his message. The watchman's sole duty is to deliver God's message, without spin, so that people would turn from their sins. God's greatest desire is for people to turn from their sins and live eternally. He declares, ***"I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezekiel 33: 11)*** Honestly, the watchman would probably love to preach Good News, but to unrepentant sinners he must first preach the Law.

So who are the watchmen today? Obviously pastors, who God has called and who faithfully deliver His message and serve His people. As God's watchman over your soul and mine, I must preach the Law. The Law, like a mirror, shows us our sins and warns us against dying in them without repentance. The Law causes all of us to squirm and have sleepless nights. But God says to his watchmen, ***"Preach the Law. Warn the people of their sins."***

So what warning do we need to hear today? Look to our Gospel. Here the disciples are arguing over who is a better disciple. And how does Jesus respond, ***"calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, "Truly, I say to you, unless you repent and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Matthew 18: 1 – 4)***

Have you ever seen two children of different races play together? How about a rich child and a poor child? They don't understand classes or poverty, but only see human beings. We adults tend to hate because of skin color or look down upon those who are less fortunate. And the more we expose our children to the idea of one being better than another, they become more and more like us, losing their child-like trust, replacing it with conditional trust. They lose their greatness in God's kingdom and become like us; thinking we are great Christians but in reality we're not. Jesus says, ***"Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in Me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck, and to be drowned in the depth of the sea."*** (Matthew 18: 6)

As members of the Christian church, the body of Christ, we cause our little ones to stumble when we show intolerance toward others' gifts or say that this music is un-Christian or that it is acceptable to criticize Christ's church and other Christians. You might try to rationalize it saying that it's just feelings but do you realize who kids learn these behaviors from? Watching you. Listening to you. Repeating your words and feelings believing that's what Christ is all about, bickering, intolerance, and harsh judgments, all based upon personal tastes. And thus we are putting spiritual stumbling blocks in front of kids. And Jesus says, ***"It would be better to have a heavy millstone hung around our neck"*** than cause one of the little ones to stumble. How serious is Jesus about this sinful behavior? He says it would be better if we went and drown ourselves off North shore than allow another to sin, especially a little one.

And that's the basis of understanding the remainder of our Gospel. It would be better to exclude a lifelong Lutheran who is self-righteous and legalistic than lose one of the greatest in God's kingdom. ***"Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire."*** (Matthew 18: 7 – 9)

Now, Jesus isn't telling us to literally cut off our arm or pluck out our eye, but that it'd be better to expel one member of the body rather than lose the entire body. It'd be better to lose a single member of Saint Mark rather than risk losing the entire church because of that individual. Because we have been entrusted with the care of little ones in our homes, our church, and our school, we must take this responsibility seriously. ***"What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep, and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray? And if he finds it, truly, I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish."*** (Matthew 18: 12 – 14)

Causing another to stumble is a serious offense, possibly leading to eternal judgment. So

the church must fiercely guard against those who model such an offense and Jesus gives us a 4-fold process of how we must all be watchmen in order prevent another to either be seduced by sin or of what worship should be or how Christians must live. (***“If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.”*** (Matthew 18: 15 – 17)

But, before we go further we must understand that confronting another person with their sinful behavior MUST have the motivation of love and the purpose of restoring, not humiliating. The intent is not to make another’s sins public but to restore them and for them to *‘repent and become like children.’* But to do that, we first must take the plank from our own eye.

The process of restoration begins with a person confronting another with their sin, and two things happen. First, the person makes a judgment based solely on God’s word that another has offended them. Forget that, *‘judge lest ye be judged’* right? But by repeating God’s judgment found in His word, we make a judgment that the person has committed a wrong and needs to be restored. Their sin could cause others to stumble, even a little one, so we confront to restore.

The second point is that the sin is between the offender and the offeree; NO ONE ELSE. If you have a problem with someone, talk to them. Do not talk to anyone else about it, because if you do that sin has now been placed on them too. If you feel there is offense, keep it to yourself. It’s no one’s business. Gossip destroys churches, it impedes growth, and kills trust.

After confronting them alone, if they refuse to *‘repent and become like children’* bring one or two more with you, presumably who agree with your judgment. If they don’t agree with you, get over it. Assuming two or three witnesses confront the offender and they still don’t *‘repent and become like children’* then bring them before the church and if they continue in their hardness of heart, excommunicate them until they *‘repent and become like children’* and are fully restored to the community of believers.

Because we are ‘one body yet many members’ and because we do not want to cause a single person to stumble because of our sinful words and actions and twisted expectations of church, God has called each of us to be watchmen and confront each other with their sin in order to prevent being cast into the sea with a millstone hung around their neck. We don’t want to cause harm to the body because of an individual. Instead, we want to repeat the forgiveness Jesus gave us as He hung dying on the cross. We are to use His power of love and freedom, ***“Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”*** (Matthew 18: 18) We destroy the sin with forgiveness and restoration. By confronting another with their sin, we expose that lack of child like faith in the offender, but through the declaration ***‘Your sins are forgiven’*** we see them *‘repent and become like children’* and we ourselves *‘repent and become like children’* by their restoration. By removing sin, both our own and those around us through forgiveness, we are empowered to live Christ here and now and celebrate the fact that we are all God’s children, forever. Amen.