

September 10, 2023 – Ezekiel 33:7-9 & Matthew 18:1-20

We've recently been having a discussion here at Immanuel about our signage. The idea has been thrown around of putting an electronic sign in front of the church so that we can display information about the school and events at the church and so on. We've even got a salesman coming in to give us more information in a couple weeks.

Now, there are plenty of pros and cons to weigh when making a decision like this. We've already hashed some of them out at a voter's assembly, which is why we tabled the decision until we had more information. And I don't intend to get into those right now. What I do want to point out is something that I hope is obvious: new signage does not constitute evangelism.

Like I said, I hope that's obvious. I hope it's obvious that a sign cannot replace you speaking the Gospel to another person. And it doesn't matter if it's electronic or colorful or stands up and does the Mexican hat dance. A sign will never replace you telling someone about Jesus.

But I think a lot of us wish it could. Because evangelism is hard. It's uncomfortable. It's risky. And there are so many questions that fill our minds about how we should go about doing it. And, I think the one question I get about evangelism, more than any other question, is not, "What should I say," but instead, "How much should I say?"

In other words, how pushy should you be? How forthright with your faith? How frequent in your testimony? By and large, most catechized Lutherans know what to say. We just don't know how much of it to say. We have the cure, but we don't know the dosage.

Ask a dozen people and you'll get a dozen opinions. Some will tell you that you should be careful and gentle. Avoiding any possibility of offense or judgment. If you know a person doesn't want to hear it, then don't say anything. If you know it will just cause an argument, then keep your mouth shut. Instead, as Jesus said, let them know you are a Christian by your love.

Others take the opposite approach. After all, they say, the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing. It will always be offensive to witness to your faith. If you let that stop you, then you'll never say a word to anyone. We are commanded to go and make disciples. And walking on eggshells doesn't accomplish that. So be upfront about it. Be bold. Be offensive, if necessary.

Which approach is right? Well, honestly I see value in both. Paul tells us to speak the truth, but do it in love. Peter tells us to always be prepared to defend our hope in Christ, but to do so with gentleness and respect and good behavior. John tells us that anyone who doesn't listen to our message is from the devil, but even though they hate us, we are called to love them as Christ loved us.

Witnessing to Christ's transforming power through kindness and generosity is great. And has lots of value. But you must still speak. You must still declare the Word of God. No matter how uncomfortable that may be. No matter how useless it may seem.

Ezekiel, in our Old Testament lesson, talks about this reality. Ezekiel is a prophet living in Babylon during the captivity. And this is a new situation for the Israelites. Because they're no longer living in their own land under their own laws. Where virtually everyone is a Jew from birth.

They're living in Babylon. Under Babylonian laws. Where they are a minority. And, for the first time in centuries, they have to do something they've never had to do before: evangelize. They have to share their faith. They have to defend their faith. They have to learn what it means to be in the world, but not of it. In many ways, they have to learn the same lesson that the first Christians would learn again 500 years later. The same lesson that we're still learning today.

And so, surprisingly, what we get in Ezekiel, of all places, is a great outline of a modern day Gospel message to unbelievers. And, as I mentioned, the first element of that message is to speak up. God is speaking to Ezekiel in this passage, but he's also speaking to each one of us. And he is saying that we are each a watchman. We stand on the city walls, watching for enemies that might approach. Enemies of sin and temptation and wickedness.

And when, in our watchfulness, we see a person begin to fall victim to that sin, we have an obligation to warn them. To tell them, "What you're doing is wrong." To say, "You are headed down a path of destruction. To let them know, *"The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."*

We are watchmen and we have an obligation to warn them. However, we don't have an obligation to change them. To force them to listen. If we speak and they ignore us, reject us, hate us for saying anything at all, then that's on their head. We've done our job. But we do have an obligation to speak. And if we don't, then we carry the guilt of their destruction on our heads.

But what do we say? Ezekiel says that we should warn them. Does that mean that we should go around with a sandwich board around our neck, crying out, "Repent! The end is near!" No. We've all heard of the boy who cried wolf. A watchman who warns people even when there's no danger near is just as useless as a watchman who doesn't warn when a danger is near.

Our words need to be judicious and timely. We speak when the opportunity arises. When the Lord opens our eyes to their need for a warning. When we see the enemy approaching.

And the warning we give is the same one that Ezekiel gives in the verses that follow this passage. Your righteousness is no guarantee of salvation. Your good works do nothing to save you. He tells us that a man can be righteous his entire life. He can live an absolutely perfect life.

And yet if, at the end of his life, he commits one sin. One act of injustice. One act of wickedness. It's all wasted. None of his righteousness will be remembered by God. An entire lifetime of goodness will be wiped out as if it had never happened.

Kinda makes you realize the fallacy in the old question, "Why do bad things happen to good people?" Who is good? How do you define good? God defines it as perfection. In God's eyes, there are only two kinds of people in this world: perfect and less-than-perfect. Righteous and sinner. So, in general, bad things don't happen to good people. Bad things happen to bad people. And we're all bad.

But you know, there was one time when bad things happened to a good person. There was one time when the very worst things happened to the very best person. To the only perfect person to ever walk this sinful earth. When Jesus Christ went to the cross on our behalf, a righteous man remained righteous, and yet died for it.

Died so that we could turn from our wickedness and live. Died so that whether we sinned once in our life or a thousand times or a million times, we could always turn from it and find salvation. Turn from it and find that God remembers our sin no more. Because every bit of it had been crucified on the cross with Christ.

When the people heard Ezekiel teach this to them, they didn't like it. They told him, *"The way of the Lord is not just."* And you know what? In their own way, they were right. God's grace is not just. Not in human terms. If it were just, Jesus would not have died for us. If it were just, we would all be condemned to hell.

But no, the beauty of grace is that it's unjust. The beauty of grace is that a righteous man died. And wicked men like us live. So that then we, made righteous, could suffer and die. And those wicked men who persecute and reject us might live. And so on, throughout history. Until that final day when the end really is near, and Christ returns to take the watchmen from the walls. Because there will no longer be any enemy to watch for.

Jesus tells us in our Gospel lesson, "*Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.*" Our words have the power to bind and to loose. They have the power to bind a unrepentant sinner in their sin, showing them just how close their destruction really is. But they have the power to loose the repentant sinner. To set them free from sin, death, and the devil. To show them the enemy approaching and then show them the God who fought on their behalf, so that they have nothing to fear.

Our words are... a sign. Pointing not just to our church or our school or our events. Our words are a sign pointing the way to the God who saves. Amen.