**Pentecost 16—A**  
**Ezekiel 33:7-11**  
**We Are Responsible for One Another**

Do you read warning labels? There are some crazy warning labels out there. A label for an iron-on t-shirt transfer warns: “Do not iron while wearing shirt.” On this wire hanger from the dry cleaners it warns: “Caution. Do not swallow.” A warning label for a letter opener reads: “Safety goggles recommended.” One of my favorites: “Do not hold wrong end of chainsaw.” These are obvious examples of going overboard on warning labels. Warning signs are meant to provide protection. If the warning signs are missing, people can be in danger. If people ignore warning signs, they can place themselves in danger.

Our sermon reading for today also serves as a warning. The prophet Ezekiel declares this warning to his people. We, the modern day prophets are also called to proclaim this warning to others. The Lord instructs us to proclaim this warning because we are responsible for one another. The relationship we have with God is something that God wants all of us to be concerned about—both our relationship to him and our neighbor’s relationship to him. As we listen to the Lord speaking to the prophet Ezekiel this morning, the Lord will tell us that he has made us watchmen; therefore, we are to warn one another to repent, and to preach the gospel to the repentant sinner.

I. The Lord has made us watchmen (7)

Ezekiel was preaching to the Israelites after they had been conquered by the country of Babylon and taken away from their homes to Babylon in exile. The Lord had a message for Ezekiel. He said, “Son of man, I appointed you to be a watchman for the house of Israel. Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you are to warn them from me” (7). The Lord instructed Ezekiel to speak to his countrymen, and the Lord reminded Ezekiel of the important role of a watchman in ancient times. In an ancient walled city, the watchman was vital. In large metropolitan areas, most of the people lived outside the city walls. Even in smaller cities, the people worked in the fields, vineyards, orchards or commercial establishments, most of which were outside the city walls. When danger threatened the city, perhaps an invading army, the watchman high atop the city walls would see it first. He would then sound the warning trumpet so all within hearing distance could hurry inside the walls. The city gates would be shut and preparation made to repel the attacker. If someone heard the warning, but paid no attention, it was his own fault if something happened to him. But if, on the other hand, the watchman saw the danger and did not warn the citizens, he was held accountable for the lives of those who died.

Parents, teachers, teachers of the Word and government officials are all in leadership positions. God puts people in these positions to watch out for others. Positions of authority are by definition positions of watchmen. Those in positions of authority can see dangers facing children, students or citizens which they sometimes don’t see for themselves. If the watchmen make no attempt to thwart the temptations and dangers which they observe from their vantage point, the Lord will hold them responsible for the lives and souls of those individuals. From God’s view, positions of authority are positions of responsibility. They are not positions which give people the right merely to throw their weight around.

Just as the Lord had called Ezekiel to be a watchman for Israel, the Lord has called us to be watchmen for each other in spiritual matters, which are even more important. We are
responsible for one another. The Lord does not tell us to idly sit by when we see that someone’s faith-life is in danger. Jesus said in our Gospel lesson, “If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault, just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over” (Matthew 18:15). He does not tell us to do nothing when it comes to dealing with sin, whether it is ours or someone else’s. We are responsible for each other, God has made us all watchmen, and he has given us the message that we are to proclaim to people caught in sin. We begin by warning one another to repent.

II. We warn one another to repent (8,9)

“When I say to a wicked man, ‘Wicked man, you shall surely die,’ if you do not speak to warn the wicked man against his way, that wicked man will die because of his guilt, but I will hold you responsible for his blood” (8). Without repentance the wicked man will die for his sin. Whose fault is it that blood will be shed for the wicked man’s sin? If the prophet does not pass on the warning of the Lord, it is the prophet’s own fault. If the prophet passes along the warning of the Lord, the prophet will not be at fault and is not guilty of despising God’s grace. The Lord has already saved him by crediting his faith in the coming Savior as righteousness. The prophet will not do something to destroy that faith, so he carries out the command of the Lord. The prophet’s soul will be safe.

Note that the salvation of the prophet was sure despite impenitence in the hearts of the people he addressed. The wicked man may not turn from his road of wicked rebellion against God and his rejections of God’s forgiveness. The wicked may die in sin, rejecting the death of the coming Savior. No matter what the anticipated response of the wicked man is, the prophet is to sound the warning.

We live in a society that does not like to confront the issue of sin. People will twist passages around by saying, “Doesn’t the Bible say, ‘Do not judge?’ Don’t be judgmental with me. Who are you to tell me that I am sinning? Are you perfect?” Our society has all kind of ways of trying to avoid the subject of sin. People try to hide their sin by saying that it is not sin. People may say that my sin isn’t that bad, at least not deserving of hell. People are heading to hell because of their sin. Earlier in the book of Ezekiel the Lord said: “The soul who sins is the one who will die” (18:20). The Lord has called us to be the watchmen who sound the alarm. We, who know that sin brings death—both physical and eternal, are the ones who must warn one another to repent. We must confront people with sin. The Lord commands us to.

Sometimes people will react badly when confronted with his or her sin. They may not want to talk to you for a while. The naysayers will say: “See. What good did that do? I could have told you that wouldn’t work. You should have just not said anything.” But what kind of an attitude is that? Isn’t that equal to saying to God: “Your ways don’t work!”? Doesn’t that reflect a lack of trust in God’s commands? If you are a parent, teacher, even a child—God will some day put you in a situation where you will see a loved one, who is a brother or sister in Christ, do something that you know is wrong. How does ignoring the situation or even condoning it do any good? Is that the way God wants us to deal with sin? God told Ezekiel and he tells us to: “Tell the wicked that they will die for their sin.” He wants us to warn them of hell. It is interesting, isn’t it, that the one who talked about hell and warned about hell more than anyone else in the Bible by far, is Jesus?

Why does God have us do this? The neat and amazing thing is that sometimes it works. And it doesn’t just keep a warm body in the pews, but it ignites a fire within their souls. When
Peter told the Jews they had sinned, God crushed their hearts and filled them with the Gospel. Miracles do happen! This was not just some exercise to test Ezekiel’s faithfulness. God told him to do this to hopefully change their fate—to save the Israelites. Just because it doesn’t happen every time, neither means that God’s way is wrong nor means that God’s way be ignored. Even though it didn’t work for the Israelites the first time around, God told Ezekiel: “Stick to plan A. Don’t give up. It’s not too late.” God says the same thing to us. You may not have trusted in God’s ways. But Jesus died for your sin, and God wants to involve you in changing lives. As long as they are alive, it’s not too late for a change fate!

Martin Luther had a colorful way of explaining the Lord’s command to warn one another to repent: “If you are in the ministry and see that you have rascals and knaves, fornicators, adulterers, and robbers in your parish, you must say: ‘Since this is my duty, I will point out sins to peasants, ... and noblemen, and rebuke them for these without paying attention to their complaints when they say: ‘Look here, you are defaming me!’ For if I held back I would make myself guilty of your sin. And why would I go to hell for you?’” (LW 22:472)

We must warn one another to repent, but thanks be to Jesus, as the Lord’s watchmen, we also have a greater message to proclaim. After the sinner has repented, we are to preach the gospel.

III. We preach the gospel to the repentant sinner (10,11)

Some of the people in Babylon had started to despair. Their attitude was: “Why repent? We are being punished for the sins of our fathers and for the sins of those who were left behind in Israel after the first exile. How can we live with a God who punishes this way? If deliverance from exile is out of the question, how do you expect us to live?” God’s answer was simple and direct. He doesn’t punish and discipline merely because he likes to. By punishing and disciplining the Lord seeks to turn people from their wicked ways, to turn them back to him. He wants them to shrug off death and live. The implication for the exiles was obvious. When the sins of indifference and rejection were purged from their lives, then they would live again, and God would be delighted. But these things hadn’t happened yet.

The person whose circumstances of life are good and whose future looks bright easily glosses over God’s promise: “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked” (11). He doesn’t think this promise applies to him. Death is the farthest thing from his mind. On the other hand, to the person whose life is filled with death and destruction, God’s promise: “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked” sounds hollow and accusatory. He is dying. Therefore, he concludes that he must be a wicked one being punished by God.

But the promise is gospel. It is good news. To human beings, all of whom by nature are wicked, God says, “I have no pleasure in your death.” He doesn’t want us to be cut off from him. Through water and the Word he has called us to be his children, and he wants us in his family. God’s attitude, which we usually call his grace, is so comforting to us because it is present in God even though we, the objects of his grace, are wicked. God’s love for sinners is so deep that he was willing to punish his one and only son with the pains of hell rather than see us condemned for eternity. For the sinner who repents, God’s love must immediately be proclaimed. When David confessed his sin, Nathan immediately replied: “The Lord has taken away your sin. You shall not die” (2 Samuel 12:13). When we deal with sinners who are repentant, our message is the same: “Your sin has been taken away. You are saved.”
Doesn’t the parable of the Prodigal Son give a great illustration of what Ezekiel was trying to get across to the Israelites? The son had gone off and squandered all of his inheritance and money on wild living. When he finally does return, what does Jesus say the father did? “While he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him” (Luke 15:20). Instead of crossing his arms and shaking his head, the father was eagerly waiting for his son to come home. He wasn’t holding any grudges. He had forgiven him. He couldn’t wait for him to return.

Isn’t that great for us to know? God clearly says in Romans 8:1: “There is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” When we come to a realization and sorrow over our sinful behavior, God has no “I told you so.” He has already forgiven us through the blood of Christ shed on the cross over two thousand years ago—even when Christians, who know better, slap God in the face and run away from him. He still wants to help us and welcome us back. The last thing in the world he would want is for you to end up in hell. It doesn’t matter what kind of a sin has gotten a hold of you, it’s not too late to come back, as long as you’re still alive.

Isn’t it sad, then, to see so many former Christians get caught up in their sins and assume that there is no hope for them? Whether it’s the sin porn addiction, alcoholism, adultery, hatred, gossip or whatever it may be, it often grabs control of the sinner so much that they think they can never escape from it. In their despair, their bodies begin to waste away. They feel that God could never forgive them for what they have done, that they could never be free from their addictions. They, like Judas, just want to kill themselves because of their guilt. But God’s Word calls beyond the realms of human possibility. With the words “turn back, turn back,” (11) the Holy Spirit is calling to you saying, “I want you back! Jesus died for you too, and I have forgiven your sins. I am able to crack the addictions. I can free you from your sins.”

This message that we are responsible for one another is something we need to be reminded of not only as preachers of God’s law and gospel, but also as hearers. If someone comes to you concerned about your spiritual welfare, we are out of bounds to question that love and concern. We have no right to question the motives of that person saying: “You don’t care about me.” We have no right to try and drag up all the sin we know that the person speaking to us has committed. That is evading the issue. It takes courage to speak to someone about their spiritual condition. If someone comes to you when you are caught in a sin, it is easy to defend that sin and lash out at the person or pastor. Instead, do what the Lord says: “Turn back, turn back from your evil ways and live.”

It is love to be concerned about others spiritual condition. If you see someone walking toward the edge of a cliff and notice that they do not see that they are walking toward the edge of the cliff, is it love to say: “I’d better not get involved. They might get upset with me?” Of course not. You would shout: “Watch out! The edge of the cliff is right behind you!” If you throw bricks through someone’s window, that is cruel. But if you throw bricks through their window because their house is on fire and you see that they are sleeping on the couch, that is love. God tells us that we are responsible for one another. He has made us watchmen. That means that God wants us to warn one another to repent. Then, God has given us the privilege of proclaiming the beautiful words of forgiveness through Jesus Christ. Amen.

Hymns: 493, 304