

My Others' Keeper

This sermon was preached on the Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 10th, at the open air worship service and the day of the annual picnic. The texts for the day were Ezekiel 33:7-11, Romans 13:8-14 and Matthew 18:15-20.

But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it (I Corinthians 12:23b-26).

Holocaust survivor and author Elie Wiesel tells the story of a man on a lifeboat. The man is actually not alone in the boat; as the writer explains, the man only acts as if he is alone on the boat. One night, without warning anyone else, the man starts cutting a hole in the bottom of the boat directly under his seat. Of course, the other people in the boat begin to scream at him, wanting to know if he's gone mad, wondering if he wants them all to drown.

As though nothing was the matter, the man calmly looks up at the others and answers, "I don't understand what you people want. What I'm doing is none of your business. I paid my way. This is my seat. I'm not cutting under your seat. Now, just leave me alone!"

Wiesel concludes that "what the fanatic (and the egoist) will not accept, but what you and I cannot forget, is that all of us are in the same boat."

We are prone to imagine, I suppose, that whatever others do is finally none of our business, and that the way people live is ultimately a matter of their own personal choices—choices which they presume they are free to make. So, the problem we may have with the readings for this morning, especially on a bright, church picnic morning, is that these texts are so highly contradictory of free choice and so completely oriented toward that which is relational rather individualistic. The prophet, the apostle, and Jesus all trample our notions of human behavior as purely private and exclusively individual.

So says the Prophet Ezekiel, "If I say to the wicked, 'O wicked ones, you shall surely die,' and you do not speak to warn the wicked to turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but their blood I will require at your hand. But if you warn the wicked to turn from their ways, and they do not turn from their ways, the wicked shall die in their iniquity, but you will have saved your life" (Ezekiel 33:8, 9).

If somebody is messing up, and you know they're messing up, and you don't warn them to stop—you don't confront them about their behavior—Ezekiel says you will share with them the responsibility for the consequences.

"Owe no one anything, except to love one another," Paul urges us, "for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments are summed up in this word, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:8-10).

If another member of the church sins against you, Jesus teaches, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If that doesn't work, take two or three others next time; and if that doesn't work, present it publicly before the whole church (Matthew 18:15-20).

Allow me to speak for myself: this is not the way I behave. Rather, I think to myself, "What you're doing is none of my business. You paid your way. That's your seat. You're not cutting under my seat. I should just leave you alone." Much of the time, this is what I do—leave you alone, even though what you may be doing is both self-destructive and harmful of others. You

might be drinking yourself to death. You might be cheating on your spouse. You might be neglecting your kids. You may be subtly or not so subtly offending other members of the congregation. You might not be doing what you promised you would do; but, hey, who am I to say anything? That's your seat, not mine. So, I turn away from you in silence.

Rather than say anything, rather than confront you face-to-face, rather than warn you to stop, lest I be too judgmental and self-righteous, I choose to remain silent. After all, it's your life. Live it the way you want. Why should it matter to the rest of us how you live? Except that the way you are living your life *does* matter to us. A fractured relationship between just two people—husband and wife, brothers and sisters, life-long friends, members of a congregation—all can potentially injure the whole community. Even the persistent absence of sisters and brothers at worship is damaging to the community, an injury to the body of Christ, and a weakening of the family of faith.

“If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it” (I Corinthians 12:26). But how can we know whether to suffer with you or rejoice with you when you are never here? When you never say anything? When we know nothing about you except that you're cutting a hole in our boat.

Good musicians are trained, nurtured and sustained by *communities* of musicians. A musician is never a musician alone. Rarely is there an athlete who has achieved excellence apart from *communities* of other athletes and coaches. An athlete is never an athlete alone. Tradesmen, professionals, teachers, and students all rely upon the accumulated knowledge and wisdom of the centuries in *communities* of schools, colleges and universities. You're not a student in isolation. Business men and women depend upon *communities* of dedicated experts in finance, personnel and marketing. You cannot run a business by yourself. Parents need *communities* of other parents and teachers to raise their children. There is no such thing as a “single parent.” And those parents need a community of faith in which to raise their children, if not this congregation then one of the thousands of churches scattered across the metropolitan region, because you cannot live and learn the faith in isolation from other people of faith.

Reinhold Niebuhr of the last century wrote, “Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone. Therefore, we are saved by love.”

“Owe no one anything, except to love one another; for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law” (Romans 13:8).