

Ezekiel 33: 7-11
Romans 13: 8-14
Matthew 18: 15-20

Waking Up
September 10, 2017
Mary R. Brownlow

A few years ago, my son Johannes told me about a workshop he attended, led by the author of a book, Waking Up White, and Finding Myself in the Story of Race. It was an exploration of white privilege, by a white woman who “woke up” one day to her lifelong unconscious assumptions about white superiority. Today we often hear the street slang “woke” to describe being alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice, and “stay woke” used as an exhortation to be more conscious of those things, to keep learning.

So when I read Paul’s words in his letter to the Romans, “now is the moment for you to wake from sleep,” “stay woke” is what came to my mind. And I thought, “What obvious but unrecognized reality is out there, waiting for us open our eyes and see it?” What are we busy ignoring because it suits us because it’s more comfortable, most of the time, if we just doze away with our eyes closed?

“No man is an island,” wrote John Donne about 400 years ago. Donne was an English minister and poet, musing on the way humanity is interconnected even, and maybe especially, in the face of death. His words were used in book titles, and inspired a range of people from Thomas Merton to Joan Baez. They speak to us through the years, we remember the words, perhaps because we recognize the deep empathy that is at the root of our faith: “...any man's death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind.”

So: we are not islands; we do not stand alone; we are part of a continent, as Donne says. This could be a comforting thought. I think. As I read today’s scripture passages, I realized that each voice there, whether prophet or apostle or gospel writer, was wrestling with the real-life fallout of “no one is an island.” Each in their own setting, their own context, was answering the questions: What is my responsibility to the greater community? What is the boundary line of that responsibility? How do we draw this line in the light of God’s calling, God’s love? These questions of faith reach back to the earliest stories, when Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, asked, “Am I my brother’s keeper??”

The wrestling with these questions is not over. And in our time and culture we aren’t so sure that the old answers will work. We treasure our independence. We like our island homes. We like to think that we earned our own privileges. We value privacy highly. We like our options to be open. We don’t necessarily come to church to be reminded of our obligations and responsibilities, let alone our prejudices. In today’s world, perhaps more than any other time in history, faith is considered an option and selection of a church is a personal choice. Maybe the metaphor should be: “I am an island, but I am movable and I can clump together with other islands, temporarily, as long as it’s working out. But for my own peace of mind, for my own protection, there is a boundary to my love and commitment.”

Ezekiel, a prophet who often speaks with a harsh voice, addresses the house of Israel, a community pulled together out of the furnace of defeat and exile. He calls himself a sentinel, a guardian, at a turning point in history. If he doesn't warn the people to turn around, says God, he, Ezekiel, will be held responsible for the death of the wicked. But once the people know what is right and what is wrong, they are responsible for their own lives. You can imagine that this prophet feels the weight of the community on his own soul. What if he doesn't warn loudly enough? How can he be sure he has really spoken God's word clearly enough? "Turn back, turn back," he calls. He knows he is not an island. His boundaries are blurred by the urgency of his message. But we sometimes feel that the voice of the prophet is too invasive, too accusatory. OK, we've heard your message. Now leave us alone. Your Old Testament ravings about judgment are getting tiresome.

The Christian Church was born out of ancient Jewish tradition that says that a religious community is formed out of a common code of ethics. That makes getting that code right **really** important. We believe that love of God is reflected in our behavior towards our neighbor. We are formed by the call of the prophet that says "turn back" when we do not live up to obligations of love and care. The apostle Paul carried that belief into the early church when he said, "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for the one who loves has fulfilled the law." I think that this is even more invasive, more demanding, than the word of the prophet. Waking up to an obligation to love: this is a heavy burden at times.

This brings us to the Gospel passage. The heavy obligation of the loving community is felt most strongly in times of conflict. So Matthew gives some practical advice on how to deal with the conflict that inevitably comes when people live and worship together. It is wonderful to be included in the warm embrace of a church family. The trouble is, it is full of people just as difficult as we are. Welcome to the real world. People will disagree. People will hurt each other. We can respond by retreating to our individual islands of hurt and resentment. We can just up and leave. Or we can stay on this continent and work it through. Jesus, through Matthew suggests a one on one conversation first. Without other people around, a person might reconsider without losing face... and you might rethink your own reaction if that person can point out your role in the conflict. The goal is reconciliation. Other attempts at conversation, involving more people, are still about getting everyone to the table, about mending the tears, healing the rift.

Matthew's teaching lets us know that conflict is pretty much inevitable. So when we relapse and fall into less than loving disagreement, it is not the end of the world. It is expected. Not only that: it is a kind of training ground. St Benedict called the Christian community a "school for souls." When two people take their conflict as an opportunity for the spiritual practice of reconciliation, they are making visible the work of Christ. You could say that they are enacting a sacrament: an outward and visible sign of God's grace in our community, in our world. They wake up to their need for one another. Jesus said, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." He does not qualify this with "two or three people who like each other" or "two or three people who have the same political views." When people meet each other as though Christ were present, they experience a shifting of boundaries, a shifting of priorities, and maybe, a wake up call.

Back to Matthew's method: He says that we should first talk one on one, then bring in one or two others to help, then turn to the whole church to speak to the one who has offended. If none of these things work, then "let such a one be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector." Sounds like you should kick them out, right? Well, let's think about how Jesus treated Gentiles and tax collectors.

He ate with them, called them as disciples, healed them. He loved them. His obligation to love them knew no boundaries. He recognized that they came from a different starting point. He acted as a bridge to the established religious community. He refused to give up on them, even while giving them the freedom to respond from the heart. Maybe we would all like to be treated like Gentiles and tax collectors.

Maybe because I am a mother, I look at the question of “waking up” as a parent as well as a preacher. Maybe “waking up” seems like a strange phrase here: since when does a mother have to wake up to the fact that she loves her child? Just as the Bible contains many passages that seem lofty and visionary, I could go on about how wonderful maternal love is. But just as the Bible has many passages that are hard and challenging, I could go on about how real life situations are not all about cuddling and good times. Guess what? Children grow up. They are individuals. They disagree with us. They make decisions that feel painful to us. My love and responsibility towards my children is constant. But there are boundaries on my influence and my actions. Out of love, I have to allow them to struggle. I try to empathize, not impose. I am still learning, in this school for the maternal soul.

And what I learn, I bring to this community. In a different way, we are a family. We care about each other. We drive each other crazy at times. We are flawed and broken people. But we are called to fulfill that law of love, to draw one another to a circle of understanding and reconciliation. In this circle, people enjoy the freedom to be individuals and the security of God’s grace. And we are called to show this same grace to those outside the door: to draw a bigger circle, to love more and judge less. I won’t pretend that the Bible gives us an easy set of guidelines: “Just do this and you’re all set.” Schools for souls don’t work that way. The last I heard, parenting doesn’t have a cut and dried manual that ensures success either. But we work on this, over time. We allow the obligation to love and the grace to disagree to color all our dealings within these walls, and that love and grace will spill out to shine in the greater community and the world. The habits that we develop in our school for souls are fuel for growth and mission. I guess what I am asking is: let us examine what it means to love in freedom. Let us think about boundaries on selfishness and judgment.

“No person is an island.” That makes me think of the ways that we literally depend on those whom we sometimes devalue. When we hear about the deportation of dreamers or undocumented immigrants, we need to remember that we have been depending on these people for child care, home health care, back-breaking agricultural labor, and now for rebuilding after hurricanes. We are perhaps more dependent on them for their labor than we recognize, and I am afraid that we won’t wake up to this reality until both they and we have endured untold, unnecessary suffering. As William Sloane Coffin would say, “The world is too dangerous for anything but the truth and too small for anything but love.”

No man or woman is an island. We are part of a larger, a global continent. When another member of our community experiences pain or exclusion, we suffer. When others in the global community are treated with injustice, our lives are the worse for it. We can choose to live within this web of connection or we can choose to cut loose. We can choose to impose personal preference on our world or do the harder work, the sacramental work of gathering in Christ’s name. We can choose to wake up and to stay woke to the unnamed privileges and injustices that surround us. It can be a heavy burden, the obligation to love. But we never carry it alone. Thanks be to God.