

Grace, mercy, and peace be yours in Christ Jesus our Lord and Saviour. The title for today’s sermon is “Speak Up” and is from the Old Testament reading, Ezekiel chapter 33. Let us pray... Amen.

It was 1985, in the early months of the year. The location: a chemical plant in the state of Texas. In the early hours of the morning, while most people slept, an operator at the plant was going about his nightly work which included preparing a storage tank for some maintenance in the coming days. This operator had been at the plant for some time. He knew the storage tank and what was stored inside. He had a ‘minor’ issue, earlier in the evening, of connecting a hose to the tank, but with a quick run to the warehouse he was able to make an adaptor and this ‘minor’ problem was eliminated. The storage tank was isolated from the rest of the chemical plant, the hoses laid out, and everything was connected as and ready to go. It looked really good. He was now ready to fill, wash out, and clean the storage tank so the work could proceed. All the while the folks in the towns near the chemical plant slept peacefully, unaware of developing situation.

Now, what was developing at the chemical in Texas was very similar to what happened only a few months previous half a world away. Over the evening of December 2nd to 3rd, 1984 the worst industrial disaster the world had ever seen happened. Water was put into a storage tank of a chemical known as methyl isocyanate which resulted in a violent reaction and some gas was released. As a gas, methyl isocyanate is lethal at a concentration of 21 parts per million. This release on the evening of December 2nd to 3rd resulted in a gas release of nearly 42,000 kg, 42 tonnes of lethal gas was released on the city of Bhopal, India. Thousands died in the first few hours. Many thousands more died in the following days and weeks. In the end, somewhere between 3,700 and 16,000 people died and over 550,000 people were injured because of one person’s action.

Now, going back to the night in question in Texas, something different happened. Another operator walking by saw the water hoses connected to the methyl isocyanate tank and he said something. He stopped the other operator from turning on the water and saved countless lives, including the two of them from an excruciating death.

The example of Bhopal was explained to me while working at a chemical plant. It was part of a larger discussion about joint responsibility in the area of safety, because one person’s actions can affect numerous other people. There, as in the rest of life, we are called to look out for one another. In those extreme situations, like Bhopal or Texas, it is fairly easy to say something when something dangerous is observed. But how about in those situations which do not look as ominous or as immediately threatening to our life. What do we do, or say when we see someone in a dangerous situation in spiritual matters, in a situation which threatens their eternal life, and quite possibly numerous others as well? Is it always as easy to say something?

This leads into today’s Old Testament reading. **“So 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. ⁸ 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. ⁹ 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)

This reading causes me to problems every time I read it. It is no easier to preach on. The reason is not that I don't like it. It is not that I don't understand what is being said. The problem is the message is too clear. It is God's clear command and warning, repeated time and again, that we ignore His Word to our peril. And even more problematic is God is not just talking to preachers or pastors: God is talking to each of you.

God is talking, and we have heard His Word. God has revealed His Law both to our ears through His Word, and God wrote it on each of our hearts. We have no excuse not to follow it, to ignore it, or pretend as if it doesn't matter.

So, what do you do when someone you know is in an eternal life threatening situation; a situation when the water is connected to a spiritual methyl isocyanate tank? Do you let them turn it on and potentially eternally condemn themselves and countless others around them, or do you say something?

Now you might say, 'hold on pastor, if I ever saw someone doing something so obvious, something so dangerous as what happened in Bhopal or Texas I would definitely say something, but I've never seen anyone around here threaten to do anything that bad.'

(Pause)

While this may be true in regards to earthly things, is it always the same with spiritual matters? How do we respond to those who live around us, or even with us, who partake in spiritually deadly things? Do we react the same when others, including brothers and sisters in Christ, prepare to turn on the water to the methyl isocyanate storage tank in spiritual matters as we would be if they were to do the same physically? When it is other people is it a little easier, but what if it is someone you care about? Are we more concerned about others eternal welfare and eternal life, or are we more concerned about our temporal relationships?

We know God's Word and what He demands. Moses was clear to the people of Israel: ¹⁵ **“But if you will not obey the voice of the LORD your God OR BE CAREFUL TO DO ALL HIS COMMANDMENTS AND HIS STATUTES that I command you today, then all these curses shall come upon you and overtake you. ¹⁶ Cursed shall you be in the city, and cursed shall you be in the field. ¹⁷ Cursed shall be your basket and your kneading bowl. ¹⁸ Cursed shall be the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, the increase of your herds and the young of your flock. ¹⁹ Cursed shall you be when you come in, and cursed shall you be when you go out.”**(Deuteronomy 28:15-19, *emphasis mine*) God's Word is terrifying clear here.

God is clear: reject His revealed Word, or any part of it, and you will die because you have separated yourself from Him. And so God says: **“Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If you fail to warn those around you, and they die in their sin, their blood I will require from your hand.”** This is not a temporary thing, this is forever. That separation God speaks of is **“the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”**(Matthew 25:41)

The scary part is, there are times I fail to say something when I see a spiritually deadly situation rising. There are times you too fail to say anything. Sinful pride and the love of comfort gets in the way and we watch the devils poison release in our silence. Each of us has seen others commit the most grievous and pernicious acts against God and His Word. At times we remained silent and this only encourages the wickedness and debauchery. We all stand guilty before God for our silence.

But God does not leave us there to burn. By the same Word He has given us to speak, He comes to us with forgiveness. The Word made flesh, came into our sinful world. Yet, instead of opening His mouth to condemn us for our unfaithfulness to His Word, Jesus remained silent. He took your guilt and mine for all the times we should have spoken but remained silent. And instead of condemning us with His Word for our sins, Jesus said, while being nailed to the cross: **“Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do.”** (*Matthew 23:34*) On the cross, naked and humiliated, Jesus paid for our blood guilt with His own precious and innocent blood. He not only paid for our sinful action, but also for our silence when He told us to speak, for our rejection of His Word even when it is crystal clear, for our not completely trusting God or His Word even though He has never lied; Jesus even paid for our cowardice in not speaking out while watching others spiritually kill themselves and others by their actions. This salvation did not come cheap, nor did it not come easy: it too the death of God in the flesh to save us. It came with Jesus’ final word before He died: **“It is finished”** (*John 19:30*). All your sins are paid in full and your guilt washed away by the blood of Christ. Our Lord, the Word made flesh, took upon Himself all your sins in order to be your redemption. **“For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** (*Romans 6:23*)

God gave you this gift when He washed you in the water of holy Baptism. At the font you were washed with and in the blood of Christ for the forgiveness of all your sins. Here in God’s grace we live, move and have our being.

So going back to today’s text; does God’s Word to Ezekiel still apply to us as baptized children of God? Do we have to say anything? If yes, what do we say and/or when do we say something or anything?

First, God’s Word still applies to us as much as it did to Ezekiel. God’s Word and His Law never changes. As baptized children of God, we are given God’s Word and called to proclaim it to everyone around us, Christian or heathen. For us who are redeemed by Christ’s blood, we do not do this out of obligation but out of love and genuine care for all people. We are not better than anyone else. We know where we stand before God and why: We are sinners saved by grace through faith in Christ and on account of His work. This is not a result of our works but solely on the work of Christ Jesus in our place. We deserve nothing good from God, but on account of Christ’s work in our place He calls us His own children. As such, **“we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”** (*Ephesians 2:10*)

So what should we do then? Jesus explains it in today’s Gospel reading: ¹⁵ **“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. ¹⁶ 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. ¹⁷ **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*) or mission opportunity, because Christ also died for them. Simply put, go as a sinner, to lead a fellow sinner to God’s Word of Law and to the One who fulfilled the Law in our place. We are to point out unrepentant sin in humility in order to try to lead other Christians to repentance and forgiveness. For “⁸ **If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.** ⁹ **If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.** ¹⁰ **If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.”**(1 John 1:8-10) For if anyone would say a sin is not a sin they call God a liar. The same as when anyone claims to be without sin.

Still, Christ came for you, for me, and for all people. Jesus paid for the sins of all, died for all, and rose for all people. Christ came so we would not have to live under the crushing demands of the Law. For, as St. Paul wrote to the Galatians “¹⁰ **all who rely on works of the law are under a curse; for it is written, “Cursed be everyone who does not abide by all things written in the Book of the Law, and do them.”** ¹¹ **Now it is evident that no one is justified before God by the law, for “The righteous shall live by faith.”** ¹² **But the law is not of faith, rather “The one who does them shall live by them.”** ¹³ **Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us—for it is written, “Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree”—** ¹⁴ **so that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promised Spirit through faith.”**(Gal 3:10-14)

The God of all creation has called you and continues to call you by His Word to strengthen your faith and trust in Christ. In that gift of faith, God has also given you the divine privilege to share His Word first spoken over you in Baptism which forgives you all your sins with everyone around you. Sharing Christ’s Word will not save you, nor will it contribute anything to your salvation since Christ Jesus has already completely fulfilled it your place. While sharing God’s Word will not save you, it may save others. God’s Word, spoken from my lips and from yours, does carry along with it the Holy Spirit who does open hearts, who plants the seed of faith; who does lead people forth in faith to repentance knowing they have a Saviour, Christ Jesus the crucified. We are saved by the blood of the Lamb, by Christ Jesus who died and rose for you me and all people. Your sins are forgiven. In this forgiveness let us give thanks, rejoice, and speak up and share the Good News with a world around you that those souls may be delivered from death to the eternal life we share in Christ.

In Jesus’ name, amen.

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