

Pastor Gregory P. Fryer  
Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY  
9/4/2011, The Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost  
Ezekiel 33:7-20, Romans 13:8-14, Matthew 18:15-20  
Forgiveness of Haunting Sins

In the Name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My beginning text this morning is from our First Lesson, from Ezekiel 33. The LORD understands the sorrow of his people. He instructs the prophet Ezekiel to speak of it:

“And you, son of man, say to the house of Israel, Thus have you said: ‘Our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?’” (Ezekiel 33:10, RSV)

Some of our sins we can readily believe the good Lord is willing to forgive. Yet others are haunting sins. Whenever we recall them, we flinch or perhaps feel our breath constricted.

We might not much speak of these particular sins. They are painful to bring to memory and we are shy to speak of them to others, even to people we love and trust. We think to ourselves, “If others knew of these sins, they would think less of me, much less. If they knew of these particular sins, it would shock them and they would revise their picture of me. Yes, if they knew of my sins, they would wonder to themselves whether they had ever actually known me.”

Now, the reality is that if others did know of these particular sins, they might well have mercy on us. They might think to themselves that lovely saying, “There, but for the grace of God, go I.” Or they might think to themselves, “I have been there too. And if I haven’t committed that particular transgression, still I have done the equal of it, or even worse!” And so, if others did know about our haunting sins, perhaps they would count them nothing special. But for us, they are troubling sins that linger with us. They cast a shadow on our souls.

The stubborn thing is that these sins are part of our past, and we cannot go back and undo them. They are part of our biography, part of our story, part of who we really are. It would be great if we could rewrite our biography and never, ever have done the things we did, but we did them and can’t erase them.

And so it is that in some measure, we echo Israel’s old lament:

Our transgressions and our sins are upon us, and we waste away because of them; how then can we live?

We do not doubt whether we can “live” in the sense of breathing and eating and working away at our obligations in life. Yet we do wonder how we are ever going to have a light and clean heart again. The past is past. We cannot undo it. Our past

reaches ahead into our present and our future, and spoils things for us in some measure.

## **BOTH COMMUNITIES AND INDIVIDUALS**

Such haunting sins can trouble both communities and individuals. There is no need to make a choice here. In our passage, Ezekiel addresses both Israel as a whole and the individual man or woman of God. As a captive nation in Babylonian exile, Israel could think to herself:

We suffer fair and square. We dallied with foreign gods, and we permitted the poor man to suffer injustice. We did not heed the prophets. Jeremiah tried to warn us. Ezekiel tried to warn us. But we ignored them and went our own sinful ways, with the result that Babylon has crushed our land, destroyed our temple, and taken us into exile. Here we are wasting away. How can we live?

Likewise, Ezekiel address the individual sinner, haunted by sins, some of which are known to others, some of which might be known only to himself, to herself.

In both cases, sin has diminished life, so that Israel as a whole and the individual sinner are forced to wonder, “How can we live?”

## **THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS**

This morning’s reading from Ezekiel refers to such haunting sins, and speaks of hope. Ezekiel preaches hope to the haunted sinner by speaking of the forgiveness of sin.

In this morning’s great passage Ezekiel speaks on behalf of the LORD, who wants none of us to fall into despair. He wants none of us to believe that we have wholly ruined our lives through our sins. And so the LORD instructs Ezekiel to speak of repentance and forgiveness:

<sup>11</sup>Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11, RSV)

It is a wonderful turn of phrase: the Lord knows that the people are wondering “How can *we live*?” And he answers in terms of his own life:

As *I live*, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live... (Ezekiel 33:11, RSV)

In the fullness of time, as it turns out, the LORD God is willing to surrender the heart and foundation of his great oath: “As *I live...*” We will see that the LORD God is willing to *stop* living, if that is what it takes, that you and I might live. We will get to that when we turn to consider our Lord Jesus.

## **WE DO INDEED “WASTE AWAY” BECAUSE OF OUR SINS**

But before going there to speak of Jesus, let’s linger a little with that phrase “We waste away.” We waste away because of our sins and transgressions.

We do indeed waste away because of our sins. Both we as individuals and we as communities are harmed by sin. There is sometimes a hard physical edge to this. Not only do we waste away with shame over our sins, but we might end up wasting away our bodies because of our sins.

The sports page this past week, for example, spoke of the boxer Oscar De La Hoya.<sup>1</sup> He is a magnificent athlete, who won an Olympic gold medal and then was a champion in six different weight classes. Handsome, wealthy, adored. He retired from boxing in 2009. He is still only thirty-eight years old. You would think he would have a happy life, but he recently admitted that his life reached rock bottom because of alcohol and cocaine addiction. He has hurt his reputation, his family, his body because of his sins against his body. He now says that he is in the biggest fight of his life, and God bless him in that fight.

But all of this wasting away: the LORD does not want that for us:

<sup>11</sup>Say to them, As I live, says the Lord GOD, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live; turn back, turn back from your evil ways; for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11, RSV)

This is the great principle that Ezekiel teaches. With the Lord, there is forgiveness. The soul that repents can live again. The cloud can lift, the shadow can flee away, the soul can become happy again and the body can heal again if we leave it enough time.

## **JESUS TAKES SIN SERIOUSLY**

In today’s Gospel Lesson, we find that Jesus takes sin very seriously. He wants us to exhort, rebuke, and encourage one another toward holiness of life. Jesus does not want us to pretend that sin does not exist, for sin hurts us and hurts the church. Jesus wants sin to be acknowledged and repented of:

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<sup>1</sup> <http://uk.news.yahoo.com/oscar-la-hoya-says-recently-hit-rock-bottom-013448720.html>

<sup>15</sup>If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one. <sup>16</sup>But if you are not listened to, take one or two others along with you, so that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. (Matthew 18:15-16, NRSV)

Indeed, Jesus cares so much about sin that he himself gets involved in pastoral conversations about sin -- not just the conversation in the Pastor's Study but also the conversations you brothers and sisters share with one another. It is an amazing thought that our Lord Jesus, though he is lifted up on high and adored by the angels, nonetheless cares enough about you and me that he rushes to earth to be involved in our tough conversations with one another:

<sup>18</sup>Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup>Again, truly I tell you, if two of you agree on earth about anything you ask, it will be done for you by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup>For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them." (Matthew 18:18-20, NRSV)

Not only this, not only does Jesus share in our pastoral conversations about sin, but he was willing to die that there can be some true forgiveness on earth -- forgiveness so true it finds its echo in heaven. "As I live," says the Lord, "I do not desire the death of sinners." And if Jesus must stop living to give this world a chance of forgiveness, then he is willing to drink the cup of suffering and die on the cross for the world.

## **WHOSE EVIL DEEDS HAVE BEEN FORGOTTEN**

There is a moving conclusion to the *Lutheran Book of Worship* private confession service. Each time I lead that service, I try to lift up how lovely the final benediction is. It goes this way:

☐ Blessed are those whose sins have been forgiven, whose evil deeds have been forgotten.

Rejoice in the Lord, and go in peace.

That is indeed a wonderful reality: that our evil deeds have been forgotten by the Lord, that, to use an old pietist phrase, our sins have been "lost in the sea of God's forgetfulness."

There is no need for us to be haunted by former sins. If the Lord is willing to forget them, we should be willing to forget them for ourselves. Forget them for now, and entrust them to the one in whose name the absolution is given, even

Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom belongs the glory with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.