

### ***Mind Your Own Business***

In the name of him who for us fulfilled the Law of Love, dear friends in Christ: “Mind your own business”. That’s an expression you are likely to hear if someone feels that you’re encroaching on what they consider to be personal matters that don’t at all concern you. And I expect that most of us here have also used the expression, probably on more than one occasion, to warn someone else that their advice or intervention into your affairs was not welcome. In light of today’s Scripture readings, particularly the Old Testament and Gospel lessons, I want to encourage you to do just that: to mind your own business

But we have to ask, what exactly is that? What *is* your business? In answer, I’m reminded of a scene that takes place early in the Charles Dickens classic *A Christmas Carol*. It happens when the miserly and hardhearted Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his former partner, Jacob Marley. Scrooge, as you may recall, is having none of it. He wants to be left alone to mind his own business, and he essentially tells his unwanted guest so. But Marley persists, remembering with deep regret the way he conducted himself and the opportunities he missed when he walked among the living. Hearing this, Scrooge, who can find no fault in his former partner, tells him, “But you were always a good man of business, Jacob.” To which the ghost replies “Business! *Mankind* was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business.”

Now, the story *A Christmas Carol* is not particularly religious. In fact, its central message of self redemption through good works is decidedly un-Christian. But that concept expressed so eloquently by Dickens through the mouth of Marley’s ghost is spot on. A person’s primary and most extensive business has always got to be the good and wellbeing of the people that God has placed around them. And we in the Church of Jesus Christ, who have been called to live the life of love for our neighbors, should understand this better than anyone. Do you want to know what your business is? Take a look at the people sitting here around you. *They* are your business. The people where you work or go to school, the people who live in this community, the folks you encounter where you buy groceries or gas or other goods, those who provide services to you, who cut your hair and deliver your mail and treat you when you’re sick, they are all your business. The Law of Love which Christ commands us to keep demands that we get outside of ourselves and our selfish interests in order to put the needs, safety, and welfare of others before our own.

Dickens, in *A Christmas Carol*, had in mind primarily material concerns. He stressed how people with wealth like Scrooge should give attention to caring for the poor and needy. And we in the Church of Christ recognize this obligation. James rightly asks how any of us can claim to have true and living faith if we see a brother or sister in Christ lacking proper clothing and daily food and simply say to them, “Go in peace, be warmed and filled”, but don’t give them anything to relieve their distress. Such faith as that, James says, won’t save anyone. No, the love of Christ that we have received and that fills us compels us to act for the good of those who are suffering hardship.

But our obligation to others does not end there. In last week’s Gospel, Jesus asked his disciples what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his own soul. The obvious answer is none; there is no profit in that: to have the most successful and abounding

life in time and then to spend eternity in hell would be a total loss. In the same way, we can ask what good it does to attend someone's merely temporal needs while neglecting the needs of their eternal soul? You can house, feed, clothe, employ, provide training, help to heal, and whatever else for someone in need; but if at the end of the day you make no effort to bring them the saving Gospel of God's grace in Christ Jesus, you've simply made them more comfortable as they continue speeding down the highway to hell. If you are obliged to care for the material needs of others, and you are, how much more should you give attention to caring for their spiritual needs?

And that brings us to today's reading from Ezekiel in which the Lord says, "So you, son of man, I have made a watchman for the house of Israel." It's an image the people of the ancient world would have readily grasped. It was a dangerous world they lived in. Bands of marauders would often invade the land, seeking plunder and people to capture in order to serve them as slaves. To protect themselves from such horrors, the inhabitants of the land built walls around their cities and towns. And in these walls were set at key locations watchtowers that were manned 24/7 by designated observers. The job of these watchmen was to continuously scan the terrain surrounding the city and the avenues of approach to it, so that if they saw anything that looked like a threat coming their way they could give the cry of alarm. It would warn everyone of the danger at hand. Those outside the city working the fields could flee to it. Then the gates would be shut, and everyone could be kept safe inside. Marauders typically sought easy targets. They wouldn't risk the losses they'd suffer trying to get inside a fortified place. It wasn't worth it. They'd move on, seeking the unaware and unprepared someplace else.

So, with this in mind, we can see how important these watchmen were. If they were negligent, if they fell asleep on the job, if they didn't recognize an impending threat or failed to give warning, it could mean disaster. Lives were at stake. To be appointed a watchman was a grave responsibility. And that's what the Lord appointed Ezekiel to be: a watchman; but in a spiritual sense. He tells the prophet, "Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning from me. If I say to the wicked, O wicked one, you shall surely die, and you do not 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."

Friends, this is serious business. Through the prophet, the Lord speaks to all of us of our obligation to our brothers and sisters in Christ – and in particular to those who have fallen into temptation and have been seduced by sin. It doesn't matter what sin. All sin is harmful to the soul. All sin is destructive to saving faith in Jesus. All sin, if left unchecked and unrepented, leads to death. If from the watchtower that God has assigned you, that is, your place and position in life, you can observe that a fellow believer has fallen into sin and is in danger of being lost forever, captured, as it were, by the devil; then you have a sacred duty to warn that person of the peril they are in. You are to confront that person with their sin and call them to repent and to receive God's forgiveness in Christ – and with that forgiveness the power of the Holy Spirit to resist and stand against temptation. To fail to do so, to see the threat to that person and not to warn them is dereliction of duty; dereliction that makes you guilty before the Lord of that person's death should they die in their sin.

I can hear the objections. "Why is this my responsibility? The Lord was speaking to Ezekiel, not to me." But I think we've already answered that one. We've established that the spiritual welfare of others *is* your business. Not to see that is to be like Cain who, when the Lord asked him about the whereabouts of his brother, Abel, replied, "What? Am I my brother's keeper?" The answer to that question was: No. You are your brother's murderer. You were

supposed to be his keeper. And when you fail to warn a fallen brother or sister, you become a murderer by neglect.

“Well, wait a minute here. What about the person who’s fallen? It’s not like they don’t know they’re in sin. Why isn’t it on them to repent all on their own?” It’s a good question. But it has a good answer. It is the nature of sin to be deceptive. We are fooled into believing (or we fool ourselves into believing) that it’s not so bad, that we can always turn around, that there’s no real danger, or that we’re doing whatever it is for a good purpose. The person who’s fallen is likely the last person to see the real danger, and by then it’s usually too late. The person who is in sin is like the poor guy out plowing the field when the raiders come. From his vantage point, he can’t see it coming. It’s the guy in the watchtower whose job it is to warn him. And again, if from the watchtower the Lord has assigned you, you can see the threat, then it’s your job to give the warning.

Another objection: “The Lord said to Ezekiel, ‘Whenever you hear a word from my mouth, you shall give them warning’. Well, the Lord hasn’t said anything to me. So, I’m off the hook.” Really? You haven’t heard the Ten Commandments? You don’t know the difference between what God says is right and wrong? You haven’t heard the command of our Lord Jesus that we are to love one another? Nice try, but that dog don’t hunt.

“Yeah, but there’s nothing I can do to turn that person around. I can never be responsible for the actions of another.” That’s part true and part false. It’s true that ultimately you cannot be responsible for what another person does or fails to do. You cannot make someone else repent of their sin. But both faith and repentance come from hearing the Word of God. The Word is the means by which the Holy Spirit breaks down the sin hardened heart, brings it to repentance, and then to trust in Jesus who died for the sins of the world. You can’t make a person repent, but you can speak the Word through which the Spirit works. If that person listens to you then you have regained them for Christ. If not, there are other steps to take, as we heard Jesus explain in this morning’s Gospel; but we’ll save them for another time. We’re working with first responder stuff this morning. The point is that by speaking the word of warning, you are doing your Christian duty. If the person fails to repent, they may indeed die in their sin; but you will not be guilty of it.

And finally we come to the greatest objection of all: “I don’t want to do it. I’m afraid of how it will turn out. They’ll accuse me of being judgmental. They’ll say I’m a hypocrite for pointing it out. They’ll tell me to butt out and mind my own business.” And that’s what it’s really all about, isn’t it? I’m more concerned about myself and how I am perceived than I am for the spiritual well being of a fellow believer who is at risk of being lost forever.

And for that, *I* need to repent. For that, *you* need to repent. For that, we, all of us, need to hear Christ’s soul-healing and spirit-strengthening word of forgiveness that will empower us to turn from our loveless treatment of others, and to go forward in courage, with all humility and concern, to do our duty as watchmen for one another. And when you hear the person you are trying to win back for Christ angrily tell you, “Mind your own business”, you’ll be able to respond, “That’s exactly what I’m doing.” In Jesus’ name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***