Sin and the Homestead of Our Conscience

Pentecost 14

September 10, 2017

Ezekiel 33:7-11 [Psalm 119:33-40](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp18_RCL.html#ps2)Romans 13:8-14 [Matthew 18:15-20](http://www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Pentecost/AProp18_RCL.html#gsp1)

Sin and wickedness.

I’m impressed: No one has run for the doors.

Millions and millions of Christians attend churches that use the Revised Common Lectionary, the daily and Sunday readings from scripture. We in the Episcopal Church use this lectionary, as do our fellow Anglicans, Roman Catholics, Lutherans, Methodists, and others.

Two of our readings today are on sin and wickedness. I wonder: in all those churches today, how many preachers will preach on this topic?

There’s a great scene in the movie *Little Big Man* that some of you older folks may remember. In the film Dustin Hoffman plays a white guy captured as a child and raised by Native Americans. When as an adult he’s taken in by a white couple, he’s being given a bath by the wife, played by Faye Dunaway. Hoffman’s character is clearly uncomfortable being naked in a bathtub as Faye Dunaway reaches into the soapy water. But Dunaway assures Hoffman’s character not to worry: “I shall,” she tells him, “avert my eyes.”

What evils, what sin and wickedness, do we avert our eyes from?

To paraphrase Shakespeare: How do we sin? Let us count the ways.

In today’s reading from Romans, Paul cites some sins from the Ten Commandments: adultery, murder, stealing, covetousness. Later, in case we’re relieved and are patting ourselves on the back because we’ve never done any of these, he adds some more: reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling, and jealousy.

Can those be sins? Are they sins? Well, yes. Though . . . I’m personally not so sure about reveling. Such a jolly idea: reveling.

With the prophet Ezekiel today God is even more pointed as God tells Israel: “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.”

Ezekiel today doesn’t specify what sins God’s talking about.

However accurate—and incomplete!—Paul’s list is, it creates, I think, a major problem: we Christians tend to focus on sins—for example, adultery and theft—that will hurt another person or a few persons.

Such a focus, however, allows us all too often—maybe most of the time—to avoid what theologians call “systemic sin”; “systemic sins,” plural. The sins of our government, religious, and social systems.

I would guess that most Christians, if they were asked what the prophets most commonly—and loudly—oppose, would say idolatry. But what we Christians usually forget—or, worse, ignore—is that the other major theme of the prophets is injustice and oppression. The prophets’ other major theme is what we now call “social justice.”

The prophet Amos is perhaps the most elegant and accusatory:

Thus says the Lord:

For three transgressions of Israel,  
    and for four, I will not revoke the punishment;  
because they sell the righteous for silver,  
    and the needy for a pair of sandals—  
they who trample the head of the poor into the dust of the earth,  
    and push the afflicted out of the way (2:6-7a).

I’m one of those crazy Gospel-thumpers and Jesus-huggers who believes that our militarism and permanent war economy are sinful. War is sinful in and of itself, but war is doubly sinful because it wages war on citizens back home, especially those in need.

The greatest Christian prophet of the 20th century, Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed this indelibly fifty years ago:

Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched [our social programs] broken and eviscerated as if [they] were some idle political plaything on a society gone mad on war. And I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw [people] and skills and money like some demonic, destructive suction tube.[[1]](#footnote-1)

What we usually miss in this country is the cast-iron link between unceasing war abroad and destructive, even murderous, social policies at home.

Shortly after supporting legislation that would have eliminated health care for 24 million of our fellow citizens[[2]](#footnote-2) and then proposing tax legislation that benefits the wealthy at the expense of those not well off,[[3]](#footnote-3) the President recently threatened “fire and fury” on North Korea.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Shortly afterwards Robert Jeffress,

pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and evangelical advisor to the president, released a statement commending President Trump’s resoluteness against the regime and affirming his role as defender of the American people: “When it comes to how we should deal with evil doers, [Jeffress says,] the Bible, in the book of Romans, is very clear: God has endowed rulers full power to use whatever means necessary—including war—to stop evil.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

In an interview with *The Washington Post*, Jeffress backed up his argument by citing Paul, in Romans 13:1, a famous passage on the relationship between earthly and divine authority. Paul tells the Romans: “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God.”

Steven Paulikas, Rector of All Saints’ Episcopal Church in Brooklyn, responded: “Regardless of his political credentials, Jeffress’s theology is shockingly uninformed and dangerous, and it is a sobering reminder of the power of misguided moral statements to influence matters of life and death in policy.” Paulikas continued: “there is no possible Christian justification for provoking such a conflict.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

I’d go further and say that Pastor Jeffress is biblically blind and illiterate.

First, blindness.

In his support for possible nuclear apocalypse, Jeffress quotes Paul, not Jesus.

This is a common tactic. The fact is you *can’t* cite Jesus to support war.

Second, illiteracy

As so often, Christians yank Bible verses out of context.

First: Paul was part of a tiny minority persecuted within a vast and mighty empire. Organized opposition to that empire would have been suicidal.

Second: are we today, with our knowledge and experience of murderous leaders, supposed to agree with Paul when he says that all governing authorities “have been instituted by God”?

Would Pastor Jeffress say that God appointed Hitler and Stalin?

Jesus certainly didn’t think that the military and religious authorities in Judea and Galilee in his days were instituted by God!

Third: people who interpret scripture, especially people who make declarations about scripture, should understand its language.

Pastor Jeffress, in supporting our government’s possible war against North Korea, also cites what Paul says in Romans 13:2: “whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”

The great New Testament scholar John Dominic Crossan, explains the language of Romans 13:2. He shows that the words for “resists” and “resist” are in fact military terms.

The Greek word for “Whoever resists” suggests “forces ranged in battle” against one another. The participle that Paul uses can mean “meet in battle.”[[7]](#footnote-7) The verb “resist” means “to stand against,” especially in battle.[[8]](#footnote-8)

In other words, Paul is invalidating not opposition but armed insurrection.

Much more importantly, Jesus clearly shows in his life and ministry that it is *not* sinful to oppose principalities and powers, whether civil or religious, that denigrate, oppress, hurt, maim, and kill people.

In fact, by his life and ministry Jesus calls on us, *commands* us, to expose and oppose system-wide sins and wickedness.

Is eliminating health care for millions of people sinful? Is giving tax breaks to the wealthy that hurt the poor sinful? Would war in Korea that would kill millions of people be sinful? Would deporting 800,000 Dreamers be sinful?

Each of us must answer such questions within the homestead of our conscience.

I personally believe such actions are sinful.

I believe that God and Christ and the Holy Spirit call on us to actively oppose these actions.

But not only oppose. Never only oppose.

We must, as Christians, *support* policies that endeavor to help people. *All* people, all of God’s children.

Amen.

1. <http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/documentsentry/doc_beyond_vietnam/>. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/13/opinion/trumpcare-vs-obamacare-apocalypse-foretold.html?mcubz=1>. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/12/opinion/judas-tax-cuts-and-the-great-betrayal.html?mcubz=1>. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/08/world/asia/north-korea-un-sanctions-nuclear-missile-united-nations.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. <http://www.firstdallas.org/news/pastor-robert-jeffress-god-has-given-trump-authority-to-take-out-kim-jong-un>. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/14/opinion/christianity-does-not-justify-trumps-fire-and-fury.html?mcubz=1>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Antitássō* in the middle voice. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 81b-82a. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Anthístēmi*, intransitive 2nd aorist active. *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon*, 70b-71a. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)