

Neh 8 “The Word of God gives Joy – even when it accuses.”

Here’s some true or false statements for you:

When someone wrongs you they should be made aware of it.

When that someone is made aware of it, they should admit fault.

When that someone admits fault, they should apologize.

I think we would take those all to be generally true statements, no? And I think we could even say that when that happens, admitting, apologizing, I think we might even say that is a good thing.

So lets flip them around then.

When you wrong someone else, you should be made aware of it.

When you are made aware of it, you should admit fault.

When you admit fault, you should apologize.

And if you were to do this it would be good.

And now we might be thinking, “Well that depends on if the ‘wrong’ would be credible or not.

And this situation doesn’t take into account what they had done to me before, and have been doing for five years! And I was in a real tight spot at the time, so can you really blame me?”

We objectively know that if there is a wrong, someone who is mature will admit it and apologize and try to make it right. And that is easy to say when “the someone” is in this amorphuous hypothetical scenario. It’s also easy when it’s someone we don’t like. We have no problem

saying to them (or to others behind their back) how “they need to grow up and admit they’re wrong, and apologize!”

It’s harder to say that when it is us. And is it because “we know all the ins and outs of the situation and it’s far more complex than you might think, if you’d just give me a second to explain...” or is it because we don’t like being wrong. And we are good at explaining away our wrongs. Can we be honest about that?

God’s people were honest in our Old Testament lesson. The priests and the leaders read the Word of God, the Law of Moses – those first five books of the Bible - to the people after long years in exile and slavery, after a stressful time rebuilding Jerusalem and the temple.

And we note a few things: they all just stood there and listened for 6 hours! How would that be for a sermon today? Now sure, their culture was more auditory than ours, but this is still remarkable. They had been without God’s written word so long that they thirsted for it, they set aside all other business that day, to hear what God would have to say to them.

And at least some of what he had to say was: that they had been doing something or some-things wrong. How do we know? “For all the people wept as they heard the words of the Law.” And it isn’t weeping for joy, since the priests have to comfort them.

But this, weeping, is the correct response isn’t it? We did the true or false game earlier. If someone is wrong they should be told and admit it. And so the people were told they were wrong and, if their tears are any indication – let alone chapter 9 where they do formal confession - they admitted they had done wrong.

What exactly had they done wrong? Hard to say. Maybe some form of the Levitical law that had gotten lost during the exile. Maybe some moral law they had been blind to. In chapter 9 they

even confess for the sins of the their fathers'! But what do we *not* see? Excuses. "But Ezra and Nehemiah, we didn't have the written law in Babylon so how could we be expected to know? That's not fair! We were slaves! How could we be expected to have kept it. It's been a huge change coming here and rebuilding the walls and temple, give us a break..." You don't hear that do you? They heard the law of God, they wept because they had broken it. And in chapter 9 they will confess it.

You also will find that the priests and teachers then go among the people, and they don't water it down, to try and let the people off the hook or feel better or say they weren't wrong afterall. No, the priests and teachers give the "full meaning". No defensiveness, no projection. The Word of God stands true, they stand "wrong."

But then something peculiar happens. The priests come to the people and tell them to, not continue mourning, but to rejoice. To celebrate. Why? Because, as we have already established, when there's a wrong and someone is made aware of it and admits it – that's a good thing! Even more, we begin to see that God's Word is a gift, even when it tells you you're wrong.

If the bridge is out, and the sign says "turn back you're on the wrong path the bridge is out." That sign, while carrying bad news, is still a good sign to have.

There will be a time for confession for the people returned to Jerusalem, but the priests say, it isn't today. Today we rejoice that God's Word has come to us. We have the truth, we have a solid foundation, we have His Word among us that, yes, tells us how we are wrong and need a Savior, but also how he has promised (and yes it's in the books of moses too) a Savior who will come. This is good news.

God could have been the “Divine watchmaker” who spun up the universe and let it tick on it’s own – without ever giving a word or promise to it. And if that was the case we would be lost in this universe without direction or hope, to live, to do wrong to one another and get mad about it, to die, to stay dead. But instead he gives his Word, his promise, himself – to warn, to direct, to save.

And so the priests instructed the people to rejoice. Do we share in their rejoicing? They hadn’t seen an Old Testament scroll in years. We are surrounded by Bibles, we have them in our homes. And yet we can read ten news articles and still just don’t have the time for a half a chapter of God’s Word. And if that seems guilt trippy, well it is. And if you feel guilty hearing it maybe it’s because you’ve been made aware that you’re apathetic at times. And maybe we should admit it. Remember those true and false statements at the beginning of this sermon?

I am apathetic at times to God’s Word. And I have broken his laws. And I am not immune to self justifying and trying to explain it away.

This is not to say if we do more devotions we save ourselves. It is to say we have things we are wrong about, and so we need a Savior.

So did they.

And the priests tell them to rejoice because God is their Savior and ours and He had given them His Word once more, he will fulfill it.

And here we are in Epiphany, in the New Covenant. Where we recall the fulfillment of God’s Word in that The Word made flesh who comes and dwells among us! He has given us his Word, Jesus His Son. To bear our sins, to die and rise for our salvation. He gives us now His Word, his gifts of Sacrament, which we confess because they are in His Word.

Rejoice! Yes, even when you are wrong – rejoice! God has not damned you for your sin, hear the Good News that God has sent a Savior for us who have been wrong so often. We don't need to lie about it, hide it behind a mask. No let's confess it, and give thanks to God for his love to us nevertheless. We don't need to be afraid of being wrong, because the One who is true and right and good loves and saves us. This is hard, but it is good and God-pleasing.

We are studying the proverbs on Tuesdays. 12:1 Whoever loves discipline loves knowledge,

but he who hates reproof is stupid. // 13:1 A wise son hears his father's instruction,

but a scoffer does not listen to rebuke. // 15:2 A scoffer does not like to be reproved;

he will not go to the wise. // 9:8 Do not reprove a scoffer, or he will hate you;

reprove a wise man, and he will love you. // 17:10 A rebuke goes deeper into a man of understanding than a hundred blows into a fool.

No one is saying reproof, rebuke, and hearing you are wrong is fun. But it can certainly be for your Good. And is God wise enough to know when we need to hear it? So may we be like the people of God we read about today. When the word comes to us, even to condemn us, may we respond, even if painfully: "Amen amen!" May we confess that if we are wrong, let God be right, that is right and good. He is right and Good, and it ever shall be. Even if we decrease, he will increase.

And laid low by God's word when it convicts us, may that cause us to lean ever more on the Savior and His Righteousness that he gives freely. And if you think he might not give freely to you, because you are too far gone, or don't "feel it" enough, or have too much apathy...

Consider that He didn't have to come at all. God didn't have to send us anything. But he has. He sent his Word as the people rejoice in in our reading today. And he has sent his Son. God come down. And our Lord Jesus had every excuse and reason to be defensive and project on us. He could have said "these sins aren't mine, I don't deserve this wrath. These sins and this wrath belongs to them, not me." He could have got off that cross. He didn't. He actually didn't and that fact is recorded inside and outside the Bible, in history. This is how great his love is. He has shown it.

And His Word and promise and gifts come to us, he didn't have to send them either. He could have saved them for "better people." But here they are. Rejoice!

The Word of God gives joy, even when it accuses. And rejoice all the more, because the Word not only accuses, it offers promise upon promise shown in Christ, the Savior, who really came into history, to die and rise to save you and bring you to a place not of condemnation, but of full forgiveness and rejoicing. Amen amen.