

THE FIFTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST | SEPTEMBER 10, 2023

EZEKIEL 33:7-11 | PSALM 119:33-40 | ROMANS 13:8-14 | MATTHEW 18:15-20

Almost two hundred years ago, the Frenchman Alexis de Toqueville visited the United States and wrote a kind of outsider's travel guide. One of the things he was most struck by was that "Americans of all ages, all conditions, all minds constantly unite. Not only do they have commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but they also have a thousand other kinds: religious, moral, grave, futile, very general and very particular, immense and very small." In fact, he wrote, there is "scarcely and undertaking so small that Americans do not unite for it."¹

It's hard to imagine that someone who visited United States in 2023 would be overcome by how people "constantly unite." Our civic life feels increasingly anemic. To use a well-worn metaphor, we used to go to bowling leagues. But now we mostly bowl alone.²

So I was intrigued to see an article in *The Economist* last week about one part of American civic society that's thriving: megachurches.³ But the story takes an ironic twist when you dig into what's actually happening. Many of these megachurches seek to reach people who have no prior experience with religious practices and get them involved in church life. But they're finding that more of their new members are actually people who have a history of church participation but are looking for a church where they can be anonymous, worship as a spectator, and feel less responsible for the mission of the church. In short, they're looking for a church where it doesn't really matter if they're there or not. So, yes, more people are getting involved. But mostly because they are looking for ways to get less involved.

The reasons our civic life feels fragile are many and various, but the megachurch example highlights one issue in particular that's worth focusing on. If you unite with other people, if you make common cause, if you get involved, you are choosing to become responsible. And if something goes wrong—which, let's be real, it probably will at some point—it will become your problem to fix. It's only downside. And if that's the way you think about life, it makes sense to minimize your involvement. Don't unite. Don't make common cause. Just go bowling alone.

But there is another better and more useful way to think about responsibility. And you get a glimpse of it in our Hebrew Bible reading about Ezekiel.

Earlier in the book, Ezekiel was called to be a prophet to the people of Israel. That's what the first thirty-two chapters of the book are about. Today's reading comes right after the fall of Jerusalem. The people are about to go into exile. Life as the people know it is about to change dramatically. And at this moment in the story, you could easily imagine Ezekiel thinking to himself, "You know, I'd like to get less involved." But God renews his call to serve as a prophet in this new situation. So even though they are entering a new phase of their life together, God, Ezekiel and God's people are going to stay in relationship with one another.

But when his calling is renewed, God takes care to define exactly what this calling is. His calling is to give the people the word that he hears from God's mouth, to be "a sentinel for the house of Israel." But notice exactly what he is responsible for. If Ezekiel brings the people the word of God, and they people

¹ "Tocqueville, Democracy in America, On the Use That the Americans Make of Association in Civil Life," accessed September 6, 2023, <https://press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/805328.html>.

² Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (Simon and Schuster, 2000).

³ "American Megachurches Are Thriving by Poaching Flocks," accessed September 6, 2023, <https://www.economist.com/united-states/2023/08/24/american-megachurches-are-thriving-by-poaching-flocks>.

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don't listen, God says that won't be Ezekiel's fault. But if Ezekiel doesn't bring the people the word of God, and the people are never given an opportunity to change their ways, then God says that Ezekiel will be accountable. Ezekiel is not responsible for everything that happens. There will be events and situations and people who will be outside of his control. God acknowledges that.

But the story assumes some level of responsibility as a given. There is no way for Ezekiel to opt-out of public life entirely and say, "I'm only here as a spectator. Just here to observe. Don't mind me." Just by virtue of being alive, Ezekiel is involved. Ezekiel is responsible.

And to meet those responsibilities, God gives him a vocation. To remind people of God's faithfulness to them and to encourage them to reflect God's mercy in their relationships with one another. After all, what God desires is not punishment or death or ruin. "I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked," God says. "But that the wicked would turn from their ways and live." What God desires is change. And God will bring about that change through the life and ministry of Ezekiel.

This puts responsibility in a different light. Responsibility isn't just about what happens if things go wrong. It's about how God gives us the freedom to live and love and serve in ways that actually make a difference. You could imagine God telling Ezekiel, "If you don't want to keep this prophetic vocation, I can just come in and fix everything later. So, you know, it's whatever." But God tells Ezekiel that the ways in which he lives his vocation will have a real impact on God's people.

The point here is not—and I'll be honest, this is why I was hesitant about using that megachurch example—that you should load up your schedule with as many commitments and responsibilities as possible, and that even though you're super busy, you should really be doing more. That would be a dumb homily. And I hope you know me well enough to know that's not what I'm getting at.

The point is that there is no way for us to live without taking on responsibility. Whether we like it or not, we are involved in the world. As the Ethicist in the *Times Magazine* once put it, "If you don't want responsibility, don't get involved with society."⁴ Responsibility is a given.

But God gives us vocations to love and serve those we are responsible to. And just like Ezekiel and Jesus's first followers, what we do really matters. Responsibility is a given. But our vocations, the ways we meet those responsibilities, are a gift from God.

Whenever we celebrate a baptism, this is how we describe our shared vocation. This is a vocation that each and every one of us, regardless of who we are, shares. We seek to "proclaim Christ through word and deed, care for others and the world God made, and work for justice and peace."

Do we proclaim Christ through word and deed perfectly? No. Do we care for others and the world God made as much as we should? Probably not. Do we have the capacity to strive for justice and peace above all other values? Not always. But thanks to the gift of the Holy Spirit, we always have the courage to take on responsibility for our actions, our relationships, and our communities, seeing them, just as Ezekiel did, as the means of change.

God doesn't expect us to manage or force everyone's behavior into what we believe is righteous. But God trusts us to love and serve. God empowers us to get involved and acknowledge our responsibility. Not because we always get it right. But because by proclaiming, caring, and working together as the body of Christ, we make life on earth a little more like it is in heaven.

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⁴ "Help! I've Fallen, and I Don't Want Help - The New York Times," accessed September 6, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/08/magazine/help-ive-fallen-and-i-dont-want-help.html>.