

Sunday, November 22, 2020
The Elephant in the Room

Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24

¹¹For thus says the Lord GOD: I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out. ¹²As shepherds seek out their flocks when they are among their scattered sheep, so I will seek out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land. ¹⁴I will feed them with good pasture, and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD. ¹⁶I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice. ²⁰Therefore, thus says the Lord GOD to them: I myself will judge between the fat sheep and the lean sheep. ²¹Because you pushed with flank and shoulder, and butted at all the weak animals with your horns until you scattered them far and wide, ²²I will save my flock, and they shall no longer be ravaged; and I will judge between sheep and sheep. ²³I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd. ²⁴And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them; I, the LORD, have spoken.

My colleague, Joel Osteen, is reported on the internet to have a net worth between \$40,000,000 and \$60,000,000. He lives with his family in a 17,000 square-foot mansion in River Oaks, Houston, Texas, with an estimated value of \$10.5 million. That's comforting because I'm sure the manse next door is close to 17,000 square feet or it feels like it is. As far as net worth, I have found a pearl beyond price so who cares. It's not that I'm jealous of Joel, even though he looks like someone standing in front of a wind machine. After all, lots of people are hearing about Jesus because of him. It's just that he doesn't look much like the Jesus of whom he speaks. Jim Smith supervised my field placement ages ago, and he told people, "sure, send your money to the TV preacher, but he won't come to visit you in the hospital; that will be me." But isn't it wonderful to look at the flashy tailored evangelist emerging from a white Rolls Royce in sunny Texas and think, "I'm part of that?" Not quite the same as alighting from a motor scooter in a wash and wear suit.

What's the problem with this picture? Many people misidentify the issues Ezekiel was addressing and with him the prophets and Jesus who stood in the prophetic tradition. The

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disaster of invasion and exile at the hands of the Babylonians was not about strict adherence to the letter of the law but of how that blinded people to the reason for the law; to create a more just society. It always makes me nervous to speak of fat sheep pushing skinny ones away from the trough because the mirror doesn't lie. Yet here we are reading lines that imply wealth is not a sign of God's favor, but wealth is not a sign of God's curse either. How we treat one another is the core of the law and the prophets.

One of the lessons of Abnormal Psychology classes, aside from making you think you're suffering from every condition you read about, is that no sharp line exists between normal and abnormal behavior. There are clear and obvious cases of people who are functioning in ways that require intervention, but where is the line beyond merely odd? What applies to the behavior of individuals also applies to the behavior of groups of individuals. The prophets knew about these complex system changes long before statistics and gross domestic product reports.

In their estimation you can get away with only so much disregard for the have nots before the whole society comes unglued. The common complaint that the poor are poor because they don't want to work has the same problem as most common complaints. In some cases, yes, it's true, but please don't mistake anecdote for evidence of frequency. I find it is hard work to be poor every time I assist someone in filling out a form for assistance. It's equally unhelpful to say the rich are rich because they are robber barons. If justice is not served a society goes out of balance and it will topple or be toppled. Your compassion keeps that from happening. Joel may be a fine guy; deserving of all the wealth that flows his way, but you folks in the pews live lives that maintain the balance we need to be healthy people in a healthy society.