Spirituality
Scripture for Life
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



Youth climate activists in Manila, Philippines, participate in the Global Climate Strike in September 2019. (CNS/Courtesy of Global Catholic Climate Movement)



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On Sept. 22, 2021, Stephen Colbert and six other late-night TV hosts featured climate change in their programs. Among other things, Colbert admitted, "I'm a great hypocrite. I'll never do anything that's inconvenient to me. That's why there has to be systemic change, to make everyone make the right choices, not the easy ones."

It's not often that comedians sound like they just read a papal document, but that night, entertainers were all but citing Pope Francis' encyclical "*Laudato Si'*, on Care for Our Common Home."

Today, we hear God tell Ezekiel to be a "watchman" for Israel. Now, watchmen are supposed to guard those who hire them, but God commissioned this watchman to disturb his clientele. Who but God would think of that? (It doesn't bode well for long-term employment!)

God tells Ezekiel that if he doesn't speak out, he'll be responsible for all the wickedness that he lets pass him by. Now that's a heavy burden. Ezekiel's only option is to do like the comedians and warn folks that their behavior is pressing down the accelerator on their impending doom.

Twenty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

September 10, 2023

Ezekiel 33:7-9
Psalm 95
Romans 13:8-10
Matthew 18:15-20

Growing up, Jesus surely learned about Ezekiel and his thankless vocation. Perhaps he meditated on Ezekiel's task as he went about whatever kept him busy before he began his public mission.

However he came to it, Jesus took the prophetic call to heart and he figured out how to pull it off with memorable humor.

Today's teaching about fraternal correction concludes a series of Jesus' wild and witty ideas (Matthew 18:1-14). After telling the disciples that the humble are the greatest in God's sight, Jesus launched into exaggeration and wordplay.

He suggested that it would be better to drown with a 200-pound millstone necklace than to set a stumbling block before the simple. As if that weren't enough, he asserted that people should cut off their hands or pluck out their eyes rather than let those body parts lead them to sin.

Then, while everyone was laughing (nervously) at his absurd images, he hit them with a serious challenge: "If your brother sins ..." In other words: "You are responsible for one another and must do everything possible to help others find their way."

What did folks think upon hearing that? Suppose the listener were someone without much social status, perhaps a woman? To what does Jesus call her?

First, he suggests that she be a whistleblower, telling perpetrators how she views their behavior.

If she gets no results, she's supposed to risk sharing her assessment with others — perhaps people with greater social status. This step entails the chance that they could dismiss her or decide that the cost of saying something is too great.

Still, by the grace of God, they might agree and join her crusade.

What would lead others to join with her? They, like she, would need a twofold motivation. First, they would need to perceive the wrong in the situation. Secondly, they would need the commitment and hope to believe that something better is possible.

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Note: Jesus is not proposing a law-and-order solution. There's no mention of punishment here. It's all aimed at a conversion of mind and heart — including the humbling possibility that the confronter herself might change her viewpoint.

It is also an innately communal activity. If the whistleblower and the perpetrator do not agree, a larger group is responsible to discern and speak out. Finally, if no

agreement comes from that, the community simply accepts the fact that the "perpetrator" cannot change enough to be in communion with them.

There's no winner or loser, but there is a clarification of values. The ones who see something wrong must continue to practice their convictions — whether or not it is convenient and whether or not others agree with them.

Today? As we enter into the Season of Creation, public figures, including Colbert and Francis, call our attention to climate change as "one of the principal challenges facing humanity in our day," in the words of *Laudato Si'*. We even recognize it as the primary pro-life issue of our time.

Like Ezekiel the disturber, Francis reminds us in *Laudato Si'*, "As often occurs in periods of deep crisis which require bold decisions, we are tempted to think that what is happening is not entirely clear," but "this is the way human beings contrive to feed their self-destructive vices: trying not to see them ... delaying the important decisions and pretending that nothing will happen."

In this second week of the 2023 Season of Creation, we are called to take up our vocation as creation's caretakers without delay. Like someone who calls out an offender, we must disturb the peace and implement real systemic change. It's either that or usher in the impending doom.

If today you hear God's voice, harden not your hearts!

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